

Roses and Lilies

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Summary: "Astrid, you and I both know you're much tougher than I am. You're more brave, and a better fighterâ€¦but just for a little while...could we pretend that I'm the one protecting you?" "Oh gods yes!"

1. Complication

Hello again, glad you could join me! This story was originally going to be a oneshot, but it kept growing and growing. I don't think it'll be as big as Infernal Responsibility, but maybe eight or nine chapters. We'll see.

There is a rape scene at the beginning of this fic. It's only implied, nothing graphic, but if you would have a problem with it, then it's up to you. I don't want to trigger anything. And I promise, as always, there is a happy ending.

* * *

><p>Astrid Hofferson was never scared. She looked fear in the face with a gaze that turned men into stone. She was strong, fierce, and relentless. So when a group of boys jumped her late one night, her confidence blinded her.<p>

Let me start from the beginning. It was late winter in Berk, something we would commonly call spring. It was still chilly, so people weren't prone to being outside.

It was this particular week that the tribe of the Shivering Shores had come to Berk. The chief, Hamish, was good friends with Stoick. The man brought his three clan heads and for some odd reason, five of his sons. Two young, three older. The oldest, Fragonard, was very similar to Snotlout; stuck up, and sure he could do no wrong, though, he never had his heart in the right place. The next two in the line

were spineless and did whatever the eldest commanded.

By any normal standards, Astrid's day, up until that fateful moment, would have been considered good. Not perfect, but not devastating. She took breakfast in the Great Hall with her friends, and then they all headed down to the academy for some dragon training. She whooped them all, including Hiccup, which was a feat to remember. After lunch at home, she abandoned all contact with the outside world and traipsed out into the forest to chuck her axe into unsuspecting trees.

Stormfly had been off flying all day without her, giving the teen dragon freedom. It had been pleasant, peaceful, and far away from whatever responsibilities she would no doubt get roped into because of the visitors. After the sunset began to set, she made her way back into the village. She reveled in the soft breeze that whispered through the leaves, as it cooled her sweaty skin. She removed her shoulder pads and rolled up her leggings, savoring the chill of the fresh spring evening.

As she passed the armory, which was closer to woods than to the town, she heard people inside. As far as she knew, no one should have been in there. She supposed, maybe it was Hiccup, dropping off some weapons he had made with Gobber. Curious, she peeked in.

"Hello? Hiccup?" She asked.

Three boys were in there instead.

"Shit, Fragonard!" One whispered harshly, his arms full of weapons.

"Quick! Grab her!"

A hand pulled her wrist and yanked her fully into the armory, as he door shut behind her, shutting out the light. Regaining her balance, she retched her arm free of his grasp.

"Keep your filthy mitts off of me!" She barked.

"Uh oh, she's a fighter." The boy next to her stated.

A different one grabbed her wrist and yanked it behind her head.

"Ouch!" She turned and elbowed him in the stomach. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"Just trying to have some fun!"

"Yeah, this place is so dull."

"And so you're robbing us, for fun?" She sneered, swatting away the next hand that reached for her. Oh, she wished she could do more. But these were the sons of a visiting chief. A little heckling was nothing to break their tibias over. Though, she really wanted to.

"Hmm," the oldest out of the three looked her over, "You're right, there is something much more fun we could do." He grabbed her chin,

his fingernails digging into her cheeks. "Isn't that right, precious?"

She punched him in the nose with her freehand. "Don't you _dare._" She spat, vehemently. His heckling just crossed over into sexual harassment. _That _was something she was not going to put up with.

He laughed, wiping the blood away. "Ooo! Feisty! This will be fun!"

Astrid fought and broke free from every grasp. She would not give up! Every time she got one arm free, her other was trapped against her. Unfortunately, her strength was not on par as she was exhausted from her workout. There were too many hands. They had to just wrangle her axe away from her. Panting, her arms were twisted behind her, a cloth stuffed inside her mouth. Her armored skirt dropped, just like her pride. They dragged her to the ground, banging her head on the hard floor and making her dazed and confused. Too many noises and it was too hot and too cold all at the same time. There was no hope now.

They used her, like a filthy rag. Her integrity was ripped apart, her innocence shattered. She scratched the wood beneath her, unable to scream. No matter what, her dignity would not allow her to cry, although she begged to.

After what seemed to be an hour, the boys had their fun and left Astrid embarrassed and miserable in the armory.

"What if she tells?" One said as they left.

"She won't, not if she wants to keep her pride." Then the door slammed shut.

Astrid brought her self up to sit, and pulled the cloth out of her mouth. She was calm as she used the rag to clean up the evidence on the floor, with uncontrollable shaking hands. An overwhelming numbness gripped her as she quickly dressed and left the room, discarding the rag in a nearby bush. It was odd, as if, now that it was over, it seemed like nothing had happened.

Outside, the sun had long set and she shivered. Home still felt so far away and those first few steps out of the barn were staggering. She soon discovered why as she promptly threw up. She leaned heavily on the doorframe and tried to catch her breath. There was the shock. This was not happening, this could not happen! She was Astrid, the untouchable! Still, it did happen, but she was completely determined to take it with it to her grave. Besides the hints of blood on her shirt, there was no outside evidence of what transpired in that armory.

The forge was closer, and the thought of Hiccup was more comforting than going home. Deftly, she made her way over to the glowing building. She raised her hand to knock on the door, but she froze. Just a moment to collect herself.

Suddenly, the door opened. "Oh! Astrid!" Gobber smiled. "Come on in, I was just about to take off!" He shifted off to the side and let her in. "Now you two keep it clean, I applaud affection, but don't do

anything you'll regret later."

Both teens promptly blushed.

"Have a good night, you two!" He said before leaving.

Hiccup looked so heavenly and welcoming by the glow of the fire. His arms wrapped in cloth, covered in thick apron, gloves on his hands. She could just hug him.

"Hey Astrid, need your axe sharpened again?"

"My axe-..." Oh yeah, she left it in the armory. Well, she wasn't about to go back for it. "Oh, I must have left it...somewhere..."

"Are you okay?"

"Hmm? Oh yes, peachy."

He smiled. "Not that I'm not happy to see you, but you almost never come out here unless you need something."

"Well, I thought I'd change that. I just wanted to come and spend some time with my good pal, Hiccup."

He looked at her skeptically. "Really?"

"Well, if you don't want me here, I can leave..." She hoped he would stop her.

"No no, you can stay...it's just new, that's all."

She smirked and lifted herself up to the counter. "So, what are you up to?"

"Dad wanted me to make a sword for the oldest of Hamish's sons. I would rather it be for the second oldest, Bertand, but he didn't come. So I'm stuck with the Frag. I don't even like the guy."

"Why don't you like him?" She asked, a bit too eager. She hugged her knees to her chest.

"He reminds me of an eel. I've known him for years and it feels like he does bad things, but never gets in trouble for it. I've seen him! Fight people! Steal! I think it's only a matter of time before he rapes one of our women."

Astrid looked at him mortified, wide eyed.

"Sorry, I'm sure he won't." He tried to set her at ease, but her glance just shifted. "So, what were you up to after we separated this morning?"

"Oh, I practiced my axe throwing in the woods."

"Ah, is everything okay?"

"Yeah, why?" She answered quickly.

"Well, whenever you're frustrated, you go throw your axe."

She had forgotten about all that. It was at lunch that her parents had mentioned, very casually, that she should start thinking of marriage. After all, she was 18, it was only a matter of time before they came to call. But now, after what happened, she knew if anyone found out about it, marriage would be the last thing she would be offered. She was tainted goods now, who knew what diseases she caught, or if she would soon be with child! Parish the thought!

"Astrid?" He asked when she didn't answer.

"Oh uh, parents thing. Is your dad, um, harping you about marriage too?"

He blushed. "Yep."

"So?"

He flexed his shoulders and spoke in a low, Scottish voice. "Lad, you must think about finding a wife. The sooner you marry, the sooner you can have an heir, and the clan can't survive without a heir." Then he smiled. "But no pressure."

She smiled from her perch. "That sounds familiar."

"I know he's right. But I'm going to keep fighting him tooth and nail. I'll get married when I want to."

She smiled, wishing she could have his optimism. Sure, one day she wanted to get married, and, in some aspects, she figured she'd marry Hiccup. He was the most eligible, being her best friend and all. But, nowâ€¦how could the son of a chief, no matter how caring and thoughtful, want a victim as a bride? The thought alone was enough to bring tears to her eyes. Unconsciously, her fingernails dragged across the fabric of her leggings.

"You're spacey today." He acknowledged.

"Am I?" Her smirk was sordid. "I'm just tired."

"Ah." He hammered the blade again and surveyed it. "Yeah, that's good. Now to grind it." He powered up the wheel by peddling it.

Astrid watched in dull interest as sparks came off the blade. It was amazing really, the way he turned a hunk of raw metal into a perfectly crafted weapon. Any other time, she be engaged in conversation with him, intent on the process, so willing to learn! But not now. She couldn't find any words to say that would sound genuine in her melancholy air. So she watched in silence.

Finally he submerged the sword into a bucket, eliciting a sizzling sound. "Now to let it cool."

"Do you always have a running commentary when you make weapons?" She finally asked, amused.

He chuckled. "Nope, I just figured you'd want to stay in the

loop."

As he started to remove his apron, she decided to go for it, "Can I ask you a question?"

"You just did." He stated with a smirk.

"A personal one."

"Oh, sure, what's up?"

"Do you like me?"

Hiccup was gobsmacked, stunned, obviously taken for a loop. He didn't like her, he loved her. But he was certain that the feeling wasn't reciprocated. "Uhâ€|" Where were his words?

"I-I mean, like, just like, not like, like like, you know?"

"Likeâ€|like like as a friend?"

"Yes! Like a friend!"

"Well, of course!" He let out a sigh as his secret was kept safe. "You're my best friend, well, human friendâ€|"

She smirked at that. No one could replace Toothless. "Can I ask another?"

Only the look of patience on his face answered her.

"Would you like me, even if I was broken?" Her voice was soft.

Hiccup didn't quite know how to respond to that. But then, he looked down to his feet.

Astrid followed his gaze, only to see him raise his fake leg. He glanced up at her with his bowed head. "I'm not exactly the definition of 'perfect'."

Just by that small gesture, she unfurled from her huddled space and smiled at him. "Thank you, Hiccup."

He smiled in return, but then his eyes widened. "Is that blood?"

She blushed heavily. "I-Iâ€|I wasn't paying attention, and I accidentally killed a squirrel with my axe, andâ€|uhâ€|the blood splattered everywhere!" She blatantly lied.

Fortunately, Hiccup bought it. "Well, you've got some on your cheek, here, let me get it." He licked his thumb.

Astrid flinched heavily as he rubbed it away. His touch stung._ This is Hiccup, she had to tell herself.

The boy saw the flinch and backed off. "I'm sorry!" He laughed. "Ugh, I swear Gobber's rubbing off on me. No pun intended."

She simpered back at him, really appreciating what he was doing for her, even if he didn't know it.

"You're fading fast, it's written all over your face. Why don't I walk you home, just so you don't pass out on the way back?"

This time her smile was really sincere. She was contemplating asking him, because she couldn't stand the thought of walking out there alone, but still would not allow herself to ask. "That would be nice, thanks Hiccup."

He put the sword up to cool and lowered the heat of the fires. "Ready?"

"Don't you put out the flames?"

"No, because it's too hard to get it going, so we just let it burn low and bring it up in the morning." He held out his arm. "Shall we?"

She smoothly avoided touching him by pretending she didn't see his arm. The blonde flashed a grin and then moved out into the night. This perturbed Hiccup, but he didn't say anything as he caught up with her quickly.

"I've been growing," he said absently, "I'm going to have to start thinking about a new leg."

"Hm—" She responded. He expected her to congratulate him, or at least scoff in a mocking way—not completely brush it off.

"In the mean time, I'll just have to make a few extensions, until I'm done growing."

"Oh, that will be fun."

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"Positive." Although, her tone conveyed otherwise.

"You can tell me anything, don't forget, Astrid." He grinned. "After all, you kept my secret about Toothless. I promise I won't freak out as much as you did."

And if she did tell him, he probably would. She rolled her eyes despite the smile. By this time, they had reached Astrid's home. "Goodnight Hiccup."

"Goodnight!" He dramatically put his hands in his pocket. "Oh, what's this?" He pulled out a flower, white thick petals with a little yellow center. A Reinrose. She laughed.

This was a game they had been playing for months now. When it first happened, he stated that he just so happened to find it when he was out flying. He presented it to her and said, 'I thought girls liked flowers.' She then punched him and told him to come up with a better reason, and so he said, 'I think it makes you glow.' In turn, she kissed his cheek. So like that, he would give her a rose, and she would deliver a small kiss. Always in private, not to embarrass either of them, but it was becoming a favorite ritual to both of

them.

Hiccup waited with a coy grin and his cheek turned towards her.

She couldn't do it. Those lips had been poisoned earlier. She couldn't ruin Hiccup's skin. "Goodnight." And she slipped into the house, leaving a confused and disappointed teenage boy on her doorstep.

"Oh, hello dear! Barely saw you all day!" The sweet sound of her mother soothed her nerves. "Where were you? Have ya eaten?"

"I was talking with Hiccup at the forge, and no, I haven't."

"We had oyster stew for dinner, saved just enough for you."

"Oh, thanks, but I'm not hungryâ€|" In fact, she felt sick to her stomach. "I'll be upstairs." She turned.

"Is that another rose from Hiccup?" Her father asked.

Astrid politely smiled to the male who had asked the question. "Yeah, it's kind of a joke."

"Well, if a boy is going around giving flowers to my girl, I would think it would be more serious. When do you think he'll come to call on you?"

Never, I hope. A distinct pain hit her in her core. She didn't want Hiccup to find out about this. "I don't knowâ€|but Stoick's bothering him about marriage, too." She hoped that would pacify him.

"Ah, marriage. The most honest union to haveâ€|" And like that, her father was off in a wonderland, imagining that he would have some sort of leverage with the chief when they got married. That's right, Astrid's parents fully believed that Hiccup would be first in line with the largest bride price.

"I'll be upstairs." She stated again and fled.

Once in her room, Astrid stuck the flower in the already overflowing bouquet hanging from the ceiling. A weird, slightly sentimental side of her wanted to save the roses and use them at her wedding. But that wasn't happening.

Next, she practically tore off her clothes. They reeked with the smell of sin, not to mention they were stained with blood. Then she took the water basin and began to clean herself. She knew that she really wanted to take a bath, but the tub was outside and who knows who was waiting for another opportunity? She wiped clean the sweat and blood from her skin, but had to resort to using a menstrual rag to collect the blood that still flowed.

As she redressed, she saw the visible bruises that were forming on her flesh. They were black, and it was horrifying! It was if everywhere that boy had touched had been poisoned! She felt like it, everything was starting to hurt, especially her pelvis.

She threw up once again, into her chamber pot. There was a crooning sound from outside her window, and Astrid opened it to meet Stormfly.

The dragon had heard the sound and had been worried.

"I'm okay, girl." Astrid reached out and hesitantly pet the dragon's neck. She was afraid it would sting, like Hiccup's touch had, but it didn't. Relieved, she hugged the reptile, finally seeking comfort. The heightened senses of the dragon smelled the offender on her, and figured that's why she was sick. The fear, the vulnerability, the signs were there, this human had been attacked and injured. No one injured her human. If Stormfly picked up this scent again, she would protect Astrid, even if it cost her her life.

Then again, the dragon also smelled Hiccup, and she liked Hiccup. She just hoped the boy wasn't the cause for her human's upset.

Astrid laid down to sleep, but as soon as she closed her eyes, she could see Fragonard's ugly face leering at her. The image was burned into her retinas, his touch like slime that made her skin crawl, still fresh and lingering. She couldn't sleep. The event kept replaying in her mind, never giving her rest, never giving her peace. Maybe she should have snatched Hiccup's vest before she said goodbye, maybe he wouldn't have noticed. Astrid was afraid to sleep, just imagining the nightmares that would follow it happening in real life was hard enough. She got out of bed and sat by the fire. No, she wouldn't sleep.

2. Coping

For anyone who was confused, this story is not related to Infernal Responsibility. I update on Tuesdays.

* * *

><p>The next morning, Astrid made her way quickly to the Great Hall, Stormfly protectively following her. She desperately hoped that Fragonard wouldn't see her. Still unable to quell her shaking, she was dressed in a warm frock instead of her heavy and cold armor. Looking around, she saw her friends at a table and an open spot next to Hiccup. With a short smile she sat next to him.<p>

"Good mornin' milady!" He greeted.

"Hey." She noticed that everyone else was eating, except for him. "Aren't you going to eat?"

"I was waiting for you."

Aww. "Thanks, go ahead and get something, I'm not hungry."

He frowned, "but breakfast is the most important meal of the day."

"Yeah, I know." Truth be told, she was still feeling sick to her stomach. A retching feeling trailed up her throat. "I'm just not hungry." She shrugged.

He scrutinized her, seeing the bags under her eyes, the bloodshot sclera, the disheveled hair, she hadn't got any sleep. He knew when she didn't sleep well, she felt sick. It had happened before. But she had been so 'tired' the night before. He meditated on it as he got up

to get a plate.

Astrid let out a sigh after he left. She loved how concerned he was, but it was suffocating, especially since she didn't want anyone to know what was wrong. She tuned herself into the conversation going on, shortly deciding she shouldn't have.

"...-and then, I grabbed him by the throat and kicked him in the nuts!" Said Snotlout.

"Awesome finishing move." Said Tuffnut. "I should try try it on Ruffnut."

Fishlegs looked at him skeptically. "You can't...she doesn't have...uh..."

"Yeah stupid. I don't have dangly bits."

Astrid looked between the group, feeling a bit queasy.

"What's wrong Astrid? Don't like hearing about our man parts?"

She frowned hard. "No. I don't. Please, change the topic."

"Yeah, for real." Ruffnut sneered.

"Whatever...oh! I'm doing some training with Fragonard this afternoon, you should come, Astrid." Snotlout said, wiggling his eyebrows.

Oh yeah, this topic was_ so_ much better. "No thanks." She muttered.

Thankfully, Hiccup came back before Snotlout could question her more.

"I know what you said, but here." He gave her a biscuit off his plate. "You should eat a little bit."

She smiled and gingerly ate the bread.

"You two make me sick." Snotlout gagged. "Ever sense that incident with the red death, you've been all over each other."

"Umâ€¦noâ€¦we haven'tâ€¦" Hiccup looked at him skeptically. "I didn't even touch her."

Thank Thor. She sighed.

"Yeah right, the sexual tension between you is so thick, I could cut it with a butter knife." Tuffnut smirked.

The couple blushed several shades of red before Hiccup said. "You guys just don't know what true friendship looks like."

Snotlout gasped. "Oh yeah? Well, you're my cousin. And since we're related, we are more intimate than you and Astrid."

"Are you _sure_ you don't want to rephrase that!?"

Snotlout turned green. "Ohhâ€|dearâ€|godsâ€|. "

It was then that Fishlegs had to open his big mouth and point out what Astrid had been hiding behind her bangs.

"Hey Astrid, what happened to your eye?"

Oh, she would kill him later.

Immediately, all eyes were on her, even as she ducked to better conceal her face. Hiccup was not wavered as he took her chin and attempted to lift it.

"Here, let me see."

She pouted in protest as he swept the bangs from her face and met the throbbing, purple and black mark that was her eye.

"What did you do?!" He asked, concerned, and a little put off that he hadn't noticed it earlier.

"Didja get in a fight?!" Asked Snotlout.

"If that's what Astrid looks like, I wonder about the other guy." Laughed Tuff.

"Odin rest his soul." Mocked Ruff.

Astrid sighed, preparing to lie. "No, I wasn't in a fight. You can bet if I was, you would know about it."

"Yeah, we'd be planning some poor saps funeral." Sniggered Tuff.

"As I was saying, it's embarrassing, so I don't want to talk about it." She placed her hair back over it.

"What did you do, run into a door?" Laughed Snotlout.

She smiled at him and raised her fist. "Keep talking about it, and I'll give you one to match."

That shut him up.

After the others had left, Hiccup and Astrid remained, since he had not finished eating.

"I can fix that for you, if you'd like."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Bucket has some paint around here. I could cover it up, so people don't notice."

Her eyebrows shot up. "You'd do that?"

"If you'd like." He glanced around and spotted the simple man. "I could probably do it right now! Hey Bucket!"

A few minutes later, the couple sat almost alone in grand hall. Astrid was trying to hide her shaking as she was in such close

proximity to Hiccup.

"Okay, let's get a good look." He stated as he tucked her bangs into her headband. Astrid closed her eyes, not only for him to see better, but because she couldn't stand having him study her. "What on earth did you do?" He whispered.

She didn't answer him, a frown pulling at the corners of her mouth.

"Right right, you don't want to talk about it." He bit her lower lip and glanced at the colors Bucket had provided. There was no flesh tone color, so he would have to mix it himself. He could draw, but paint? Not so much. Still, Astrid trusted him enough, he would try his hardest for her.

"Let's seeâ€¦uhâ€¦yellow ochreâ€¦zinc white, which is also good for healing skin," he added, "and just a touch of red lead." He mixed the pigments and frowned slightly. "Maybe a bit of umberâ€¦a little more whiteâ€¦there! That'll do it!" He loaded a brush with paint, dabbing the color on particularly. "This shouldn't hurt, but I'm sorry if it does." He touched the bristles to her skin and she twitched ever so slightly. She sat still and was fine, that is until he hooked her chin gently. Her lids flew open in surprise.

"Oh, did I shock you?"

She blinked. "No no, go on."

He shrugged and continued his blotching. "Hey Astrid, Can I ask you something?"

"You just did." She teased.

"Something personal."

"Okay." The hairs on the back of her neck stood up as she was pensive in fear.

"Don't punch me for this, please."

She rolled her eyes.

"Please!"

"Okay! I won't punch you!"

"Alright." He puffed out air. "I know you aren't feeling well, I'm not blind, and I was wondering if it was attributed toâ€¦well, a certain, womanly, monthly, happenstance."

She blinked. He thought she was on her period. Actually, it was pretty perfect.

She grinned. "Quite the little detective you are."

"A-and I'm not going to begin to understand what that all entails, but if you need anything, let me know, okay?"

"Okay." She smiled.

"There, all done." He grinned. She closed her eyes as he blew lightly on the paint to dry it. "It's not perfect, but if you keep your hair in front, you should be fine."

She untucked her bangs. "Perfect, thanks Hiccup. You're the best!" She genuinely smiled.

He spoke genteelly, a touch of blush on his cheeks. "Anything for you, milady."

They talked for a little bit longer before Astrid felt her hair being tugged. She swiveled in anger, ready to pound the perpetrator. Unfortunately, she came face to face with Fragonard, smiling like nothing happened. Then he winked at her.

How dare he! Astrid was livid, ready to pounce and knock the living daylights out of him, but her body wouldn't move. Her fists were weak, and her arms were shaking. She resigned to turning back around in a huff.

"Don't let him get to you. He's all full of hot air." Hiccup said and gently rested a hand on her bruised arm. She tensed, and he quickly pulled away. "I should have known better than to touch you when you're in 'tiger mode'." He chuckled.

She gave him an odd look.

"What? It's when you get all riled up and look like you could kill someone."

She breathed a heavy sigh and stole a sip from his drink. "I really could."

A few moments of silence passed before she asked, "What are you doing today?"

"I was going to go sketching in the woods for a while, and then work on my prosthesis. But if you needed somethingâ€"â€|"

"No!" She jumped in too quickly. "I mean, can I join you? I justâ€|" She played with her hands. "I don't want to be alone right now." _Or ever again_.

His eyebrows flew up. "Yeah, sure, of course!" His voice was squeaky.

She sighed in relief.

The afternoon was spent in the forest. Hiccup asked she wanted to ride Toothless with him out to the cove, but she regretfully declined, not wanting to feel the pain of his touch. They walked together, the Nightfury following behind dutifully. Astrid borrowed an axe from the forge, since she was still not ready to go into the armory, even if Hiccup was accompanying her. While he drew, she would train, releasing pent up frustrations and anger towards her attacker. Under the sweet shade of the canopy, the duo enjoyed each other's company, but said not a word. The light scratching sounds of the charcoal pencil dancing over the paper were only interrupted by an occasional 'whack' of a blade sinking into wood.

"Wait!" Called Hiccup, stopping the blonde from releasing her weapon. She was just the apex of her throw, too. "Hold that pose, just for a second."

"Hiccup!" Her voice was irritated, but her face was tinged pink.

"It's just a gesture drawing, to capture the action. Humor me, will ya?"

And so she held it. Goosebumps traveled over her skin as she watched him study her. His eyes flicked up often, and he looked at her more than he looked at the sketch. Finally, he told her to continue training. But it wasn't long afterward that he stopped her again. Soon, multiple pages were filled with stick-like figures, Astrid shaped figures. Swooping lines, rough edges, and intended action.

Astrid's heart screamed. She could see it, in the future. He would find out what happened to her, and then rip out all of the sketches. All of his hard work. He might as well just rip her heart from her chest and let the blood pool at her feet.

God knows she didn't want it anymore.

After skipping lunch and hiding into early evening, Hiccup amended that they return. He had to work on his leg after all.

Astrid was feeling good about herself after all her therapy, so she told him to head to the forge while she took care of Stormfly.

Grateful that she was feeling better, Hiccup progressed to the forge.

"Ah, good to see you today, lad! Been busy aye?" Gobber asked.

"Yeah, I was out enjoying the day with Astrid."

"The lass has been spending' a lot of time with you, 'asn't she?"

"Yeah!" I don't mind though." He smiled. "Oh, I wanted to start working on extensions for my leg."

"Ah, yes. But before you get settled in, can you take these weapons to the armory? Shamus noticed that we're missing some, so I made more."

"Weapons gone missing?" Hiccup questioned, gathering as many swords and axes as he could carry (which wasn't much) and putting them in a wheelbarrow.

"Ah, you know how it is with these Shivering Shore boys."

"You think they stole them?"

"Until proven otherwise, that's exactly what I think."

"Hmm, that's a pretty big accusation." He dusted off his hands.

"I'm looking for an excuse to keep those boys off this island!" He pounded his fist on the table.

"Well, I hope you find it." Hiccup lifted the handles to the wheelbarrow and off he went.

In the armory, Hiccup did notice many unoccupied slots for weapons and began to put them away. Then he noticed an axe on the floor, a very familiar axe which he had made, and sharpened many times before.

"This is Astrid'sâ€|" He lifted it in confusion. There was no blood on it, like she had said, but the smell of blood was in the air, not fresh though. He didn't spend time dwelling on it as he shouldered the axe and made his way back to the forge.

Surprise surprise, Astrid was sitting on the counter, talking to Gobber.

"Well, that was fast." He joked. "I thought you were going to spend some time with Stormfly?"

"I fed her, then she laid down to sleep." She shrugged. Truth was, she was playing with her dragon when the all too familiar face of Fragonard came down the hill. She hid behind Stormfly and then made a break for the forge.

"I see. That's what Toothless did too." He jabbed a thumb over to the furnace where a black scaled beast curled in front of it, sleeping like a kitten. She smiled at the sight.

"Catch." And he tossed axe to her. "You left it in the Armory."

She looked at him wide eyed. "Why were you in the Armory?"

"I dropped off some weapons. It looks like someone stole some."

Gobber crossed his arms as he looked at her. "You wouldn't know anything about it would you?"

She clenched her axe closer to her. "I didn't steal anything, if that's what you're insinuating."

Hiccup laughed. "We aren't accusing you Astrid, we just want to know if you saw anything."

She nervously glanced around. Her eyes flittered about the metal tools of the shop before looking out the window. Her gaze landed smack dab on the face of her abuser as he stared at her from the street. He was waiting for her. He licked his lips.

Astrid dropped her axe, almost taking off Hiccup's good foot, and leapt from the counter. It was all she could do to vomit into the cooling bucket, and not all over the floor. She got sick once more, and Hiccup delicately held her hair back. "Forget we asked anything, okay?" He said softly.

She swatted his hands away from her head and apologized. Normally, after something so embarrassing, she would have run home, or punched him out. But this time she just so casually sat back on the counter, and rested her head between her knees.

Gobber was perplexed at this behavior. She didn't even volunteer to clean the bucket. "Am I missing something?"

"It's nothing." Hiccup said as he grabbed the bucket and pitched it out the back window.

"Are you in trouble Astrid?"

Yes.

"Gobber, she just doesn't feel well."

"Is she pregnant?"

Astrid looked quickly up to the man with face akin to horror. Could she be? It was too soon to tell though, right? She wouldn't be feeling sick_ yet_ if she wasâ€|right?

Hiccup snorted. "What on earth gave you that idea?"

"Well, it's justâ€|since the incident of the red death, you two have been moreâ€|intimate then in the past." He shrugged.

Hiccup was honest with his mentor. "We hug. And the occasional kiss when Astrid surprises me. But seriously Gobber, we're just friends."

The blacksmith looked to the blonde who nodded in agreement.

"Whatever you say."

Hiccup glanced at Astrid. "I'm going to work in the back room for a bit. You're welcome to sit back there, or you can stay with Gobber."

"I don't want to bother you, I'll just stay out here."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself." And he disappeared into the back.

"So," Gobber said when Hiccup was out of sight. "When is this going to become serious?"

"Excuse me?" She squeaked.

"Well, everyone can see it. You two have a special bond, and I'm wondering when the courting ritual is going to start. Or if your father's going to ask Stoick to make a contract."

"I'm justâ€|notâ€|readyâ€|" She grimaced, sounding lame to her own ears.

"Well, my guess is that he's waiting on you. Everyone can see the way

he looks at you. He _loves_ you."

Then a voice was heard from the back room. "I can still hear you, you know. Stop talking about me!" He wasn't embarrassed, per say, since he'd been teased about his affections towards Astrid for a long time. Hel, even she teased him.

"He's sensitive about it." Whispered Gobber.

"Still hear you!" He called again.

"Well, if you can hear me, why don't you answer my question?!"

That shut him up.

"The lad can train a Nightfury, but he can't ask out a girl."

Astrid gently pushed off the table, the conversation becoming too much for her to handle. "I'm going to, uh, see what Hiccup's up toâ€|"

"You do that." He winked.

With a forced smile, she snuck behind the curtain.

Hiccup glanced as she came in, but said nothing else. She saw his stub of a leg resting on a bench, while his prosthetic sat on the table. He was fiddling with it and writing down notes.

To keep herself occupied, and so not to bother him, she noticed his notebook sitting on the edge of his desk and quietly snatched it up. She was eager to see the sketches he had made that afternoon.

It might be the only chance she got.

On the first page, there was a sketch of a tree. All the details were present, and yet, something was confusing about this tree. Between the branches, he had sketched a wooden platform. There was no hint as to what it was for. The next page showed measurements and approximations.

The next page featured sketches of a terror, it's tongue stuck on it's eye. The picture was painfully accurate and little notes were made off to the side. The following page had even more sketches of the terror.

The book was filled with drawings of people in the village, scenery, and dragons. The most remarkable thing were his mathematic diagrams. They further drove the ball home, showing how intelligent he was. Next in the book were rough imitations of the chief, sadly, none of his facial expressions were happy. He was either yelling, or very stern. Astrid simpered in sympathy.

The next page caught her by surprise, as there was a pressed rose in the pages. She looked askance to see him grinning. He did it on purpose!

She rolled her eyes and placed the flower in her hair, not having anywhere else to put it. Apparently, Hiccup assumed she would stop there, as his face colored when she turned the page. The images were

labelled 'Astrid Study' and were various rough sketches of her. She blushed as she realized he had been studying her.

"Those were from before we were friends." He confessed. "You just have a very...drawable face." He lied.

She smiled at him, while anyone else would have felt her wrath from looking at her like that, it was endearing to get attention from Hiccup. "I think they're nice. You should draw me sometime. Like, formally. I'll pose for you and everything."

He looked at her in surprise. "Really?"

"Yeah." Her look was tender. She continued to look at his sketches until Gobber brought food for them.

"Don't want you two skipping out on meals!" Both of them knew that it was just an excuse for him to check up on them.

"Thanks Gobber, we totally skipped lunch, too."

Astrid stiffly took the meal from Gobber, careful not to touch his callus fingers. She nodded stiltedly in gratitude.

The sun outside the forge began to set and Astrid felt a coldness set into her bones. She would have to go out soon, and she didn't know if she possessed the nerve to ask Hiccup to walk her home again.

"Hey," he called.

She looked up just in time to catch his vest that he threw to her. "You look cold." He spoke, screwing something into his prosthetic.

She wasn't, not really, but he didn't need to know that. So she pulled on the fur vest and discretely smelled his scent on it. He always smelled good, since he apparently enjoyed taking baths, especially after working in the forge all day. She didn't quite understand it, but she was glad he didn't smell like boy.

"That should do it." He held up his leg in the candlelight. Next, he carefully tied his prosthetic back on, making it nice and tight, and then stood on it. "Hey, stand up, I want to compare our heights."

It was just a few inches difference, but it was enough to make him just a smudge taller than her. He stood nose to eyes with her, before a smile broke out on his face.

She pouted. "Congratulations."

His grin got bigger as he patted her on the head and said. "You had your chance."

She ducked at his hand, but he didn't notice.

He yawned. "It's getting late, shall I escort you home, milady?"

She sighed in relief. "Yes, thank you." She replied formally.

Hiccup allowed her to wear his vest as they walked together, and she

subconsciously snuggled closer to it. He bid Gobber goodnight, sent Toothless home, and they departed out into the night. All in all, the night was pleasant. It wasn't too cold, and homes had fires going. Really, if it wasn't for what happened the night before, Astrid would have been tempted to go for an evening stroll.

"Well, looky looky what I found." A cocky voice laughed.

Astrid whirled around, frantic, and faced Fragonard, sneering at them in the moonlight. Hiccup, assuming she was startled, put a hand on her back, and urged her to the direction they had been going. Her feet forbade movement, however.

"I see you're still unstable. Had to get a bodyguard, huh?"

This got Hiccup's attention as he looked at the boy. "Get lost Frag, don't you have other people to annoy?"

"Shut up, _Hiccup_. Why don't you go home to your daddy?"

"Why don't you?" He narrowed his eyes.

Astrid took the moment to step behind Hiccup, silently pleading for him to protect her. This action made Hiccup uneasy, as she would have decked Fragonard by now.

"Oh, how cute. Protecting your little girlfriend. But seriously kid, leave the slut, she and I have some unfinished business."

Hiccup felt Astrid clench the back of his shirt and his concern continued to rise. "What are you talking about?" His voice was dangerously serious.

Fragonard ignored Hiccup for a moment and looked towards Astrid. "Come on, we'll do it proper this time. It'll be fun!"

Astrid cupped her mouth and felt herself gag.

"What is your _problem?_" Hiccup stepped in.

The older boy was visibly irritated. "I just want to have some more fun with her. Come on."

"_More_ fun?" He glanced back to the blonde to see her face turned away in shame. "I don't think so." He shook his head in warning.

"What're you going to do?" Scoffed the bigger teen, with a shove.

Hiccup shot out and kicked him in the shin as hard as he could with his fake foot.

Fragonard grabbed his shin and winced in pain, his face coloring.

"_Get. Lost._" Hiccup reiterated.

"Why youâ€!" Fragonard leapt at the teen and put him into a headlock. Hiccup turned his head into the crook of his elbow, to

breathe, and then nailed him in the side with his elbow, then stomped on his foot with his prosthetic.

Astrid yelped in horror, unable to do anything else. Hiccup wasn't a fighter, and Fragonard was bigger than him. She knew the full extent of his strength.

Hiccup only had a moment to escape his captor's grasp before he was grappled again and punched in the nose. He returned the favor, landing a fist in Fragonard's eye.

Soon neighbors heard the sounds of fighting and came out. Hiccup and Fragonard were pulled apart. Astrid was held back too, since they assumed she was apart of it.

"Let me go!" Hiccup shrieked, his shoulders rolling with intensity. "I'll kill him! I'll rip that stupid smirk of his face!"

"You skinny little twerp!" The older teen shouted.

"You started it, you disgusting excuse for a human being! If they weren't holding me back—"..."

"This isn't over! Just wait until my father hears about this!"

"I hope he does! And I hope you learn your lesson! Don't you ever, ever talk to Astrid like that, or any woman for that matter! If you so much as glance her way again, I'll gouge your eyes out!"

The arms holding Astrid and Hiccup relaxed, seeing that the younger teen was acting in defense.

"Hiccup, why don't you take Astrid home?" The chief's son recognized the voice of Mulch, the farmer on the hill. "We'll make sure Fragonard gets home."

Hiccup sighed heavily and said nothing. He snatched up Astrid's wrist in an uncharacteristic feat of strength and pulled her along with him. They didn't finish the trek to her house, though. Instead, he pulled her into the tree line of the woods. The entire time, she tugged at her arm, fighting to get it loose. Luckily, he let go as soon as they entered the woods.

"What happened?" He looked at her sternly. Blood still dripped from his nose, but neither of them bothered to do anything about it.

She pursed her lips and looked away, her fingers curling into fists.

He grasped her shoulders and forced her to look at him. He was so angry, he didn't realize how harsh he was. "Astrid, this is serious, I need to know what happened!"

His touch triggered a myriad of memories of that night. She didn't scream, she didn't fight, she just met his eyes, tears coming down her cheeks.

"Astrid—" His grip became tender. Astrid never cried, ever. Something was very wrong. "Did he touch you? Did he hurt you? What did he do?"

Finally, she spoke, her voice weak and much too small.
"_Everything._"

His eyes were wide as he let go of her. "You meanâ€¦|_everything_?"

She nodded, trying in vain to wipe her tears.

He stood frozen for a moment, just simply staring at her, his mouth open, trying to fight for words. He tilted his head and furrowed his eyebrows. There was no way she meant the same _everything_ that he thought. This was Astrid, if you so much as looked at her funny, you'd get a fist to the face.

Except him, she never punched him for ogling.

He swallowed hard, trying to figure out what to do next. "Let's sit down, and you can tell me what happened. In as much detail as you feel like giving."

She agreed and they took a seat on a log a few feet away.

"Soâ€¦|" He started.

She was ringing her hands in her lap. "It was the night I came to see you at the forge. I was coming out of the woods to go home, and I passed the armory. I heard someone inside, so I went in and checked it out. It was Fragonard and the other two boys. They were stealing stuff, and I tried to stop them, butâ€¦|" She dropped her head into her hands. "They overpowered me instead. I have never felt so weak and useless before. I've always been able to defend myself against dragons! What made the difference between a couple of kids?"

He rested a hand on her shoulder in consolation.

"I was so stupid! I still can't believe it happened." She shook her head. "I can't eat or sleep, I keep getting reminded of it everywhere I go, and I can't even stand people touching me!"

He gingerly removed his hand.

"I don't know what I'm going to do about this! Hiccup, if anyone finds outâ€¦|" She whirled on him, staring him in the face. "Please, I _beg_ you, don't tell a soul."

"Astrid, we have to. If not, Fragonard's just going to keep doing thisâ€¦|"

"I don't care what happens to him. If my father finds out about thisâ€¦|"

"You don't need to finish that sentence. We'll figure out something, don't you worry your pretty little face." He spared a smile, but it lacked luster.

She looked up at him in an endearing way, thankful that he understood, and didn't hate her. Or so she could tell. A fire burned in his eyes, and she wasn't quite sure what it meant.

Hiccup stood up. "You're not sleeping at home tonight." He declared. "You're going to sleep at my house, where you'll feel safer."

"I doubt my father would allow that."

"I'll talk to him. Come on." He gestured with his hand.

She shyly followed him, dread slowly coming over her. She could tell he was still processing what she had said, for he was silent and his face contorted into a grimace. Hiccup was not the type to let something this big just go, justice would be served, she was sure. But she wished he hadn't found out.

Things were about to get so much worse, she could feel it.

3. Comfort

I know this is painful to read. I'm going to say it again, there ****is** ****a** happy ending. Don't give up hope. I hope this chapter helps a little.

I wasn't really sure why I started to write this fic. It was just an idea. Rape has been something I've feared my whole life. (I'm a black belt in tae kwon do because of my paranoia.) But now, looking at the reviews and PM's I've gotten, I think the purpose of the fic is to inspire others. Seeing a favorite character going through the same thing you did makes it seem less of a mountain, I think. You don't have to be a victim. Tell someone. Even if it's just me, I'll listen.

* * *

><p>Astrid felt sick. There was no other way to describe it. Fragonard's sick words echoed in her ears and she constantly shook her head to try to physically remove them. She meditated on Hiccup's sounds. Unfortunately, for once in his life, he was speechless. During the whole walk to her home, he said nothing, didn't even look at her. She followed two steps behind.<p>

"_Don't you worry your pretty little face_." He had said. And she knew he meant it. Still, she figured the more he thought about it, the sooner the implications would sink in. Then he would realize that being friends with her was a bad idea. She was tainted, ruined, and spoiled. All in all, unclean. That was fact. She had literally become Astrid the Untouchable, although for very different reasons than she ever wanted.

Soon they were at the Hofferson household and Hiccup beckoned her to go in first, wiping the dried blood from his skin.

"Hi, dad." Astrid smiled coming inside.

"Hello, Mr. Hofferson." Hiccup said, his voice a bit lower than normal.

"Well, look who it is!" The big man stood. "It's not so often that you grace us with your presence. What brings you here?"

Phlegma Hofferson perked up, waiting for the words, 'I'd like your

permission to marry your daughter.' But what she got instead perplexed her.

"Astrid was telling me today she hasn't been able to sleep, because of nightmares. I've found that sometimes if you switch up where you sleep, it helps. I'm just here to ask if she can stay the night at my house." He politely put his hands behind his back.

"Astrid, is this true?" Her father looked at her.

She felt bad for lying, but was grateful that he was keeping the truth a secret. "Yeah, I hope it will help."

"My father will be home, too." He added sheepishly.

"Wellâ€¦" Phlegma scratched her chin.

"Yes." Axel agreed. His wife gave him a funny look before the teens headed up to the loft to gather Astrid's things.

"What made you so eager to agree? Are you afraid that they'll do something?"

"Nope."

"Butâ€¦â€¦"

"Hiccup is madly in love with her and would do whatever it takes to make her happy. But, I'm sure he wouldn't attempt anything while Stoick was home. Besides, this will give them bonding time together."

"They've already spent the whole day together. I swear, any day now, he's going to carry her through that door and declare his love for her to us."

"I agree." Axel resumed his spot by the fire. "But we must be patient."

It wasn't long after that the couple came down the stairs, satchel in Hiccup's grasp, since he insisted on carrying it.

"Bye Mom, Dad." Astrid called, smoothly evading hugs and kisses for goodnight.

"Goodnight sweetie!" Phlegma called. The door shut.

The trek up to the Haddock house was painfully silent as well. Astrid tried to study her friend, but the expression he held was of such intense pensiveness, it scared her. He had been so serious when addressing her parents. Never stuttered, and he kept his voice calm and even. He never said how he felt about this, but went directly into chief mode.

Inside the house, Astrid saw that Stoick was gone. "Hiccupâ€¦" She started.

"Have you taken a bath since then?" He asked. "Since your tub is outside and all."

"Um, noâ€¦I haven'tâ€¦"

"You can use ours, it's inside." He handed her the satchel. "You can put your stuff up in my room, I'll draw your bath."

"Thanksâ€¦" she said meekly.

Toothless was sitting by the fire, watching the humans carefully. He smelled something on the blonde teen, she actually reeked of it. He wasn't sure what it was though. His own human was in a sour mood, more sour than usual, actually. Maybe it was attributed to the blonde? The female was his mate, after all. Supposedly.

Suddenly, Hiccup sighed and rested his hands against the edge of their bathtub. He shook his head in sadness. The dragon approached his human and nudged him in sorrow.

"I don't know what I'm going to do." He whispered.

The time to mourn would come, but now was not the time. Instead, he focused on pumping the water for the bath. Astrid came down not long after, clean clothes in her hands.

He finished pumping. "Toothless." He pointed at the charred floor.

The dragon ignited the wooden planks, warming up the water. A small grin broke out on her face as she realized that it would be a warm bath.

"I'll leave you to it. I need to run a quick errand."

Her eyebrows rose minutely at the thought of being alone, in a bathtub.

"It's okay, Toothless will protect you." He looked at the dragon. In response, Toothless lifted his tail to hide her. "Good boy."

Hiccup drew back the curtain for her and then left.

Astrid pulled off the day's clothes and gingerly stepped into the water. Toothless watched her in interest, seeing the still present bruises on her skin. He slunk closer to the tub, just barely resting his nose in the steam.

"I'm glad you're here." She whispered as she scratched the reptile's nose.

Unknown to her, Hiccup's errand took place outside of his house, on the steps. He sat, head in his hands, tearful. This was an unknown feeling coursing through him. Silent rage? Embarrassment? Shame? No, those he knew very well. He felt disgust. First at Astrid, and then at himself because of how he felt about Astrid. She hadn't changed, this incident didn't change the fact that Astrid was still Astrid, and that he loved her very much, it just made things a whole lot more complicated. Ideas ran through his mind, but he discovered that sadly, none of the plans to solve the problem stayed within what Astrid wanted. He would have to betray her, he knew that. He just hoped that she would understand that it was for the best.

"What are you doin' out here all by yourself, son?" Stoick asked.

Startled, Hiccup jerked up and quickly hid his emotional outburst. "Oh, uh, umâ€¦Astrid's inside. Er, well, her family's bath tub is outside and I offered ours to her, since the Shivering Shore boys are here and allâ€¦"

"It's not Saturday thoughâ€¦" The chief wondered aloud.

"Uh, she likes to bathe more than once a weekâ€¦" He said lamely.

"Just like you, I see." He shrugged. "Well, did you tell her there was a curtain? You don't just have to sit out here, you know."

"Oh, yeah, I know, I just wanted to give her a bit of privacy, is all." He cleared his throat. "Also, I didn't ask you, but she's sleeping over here tonight."

"Why's that?" The chief crossed his arms.

"Umâ€¦I don't want to lie to you, dadâ€¦but I've been sworn to secrecy."

"You better not be doing anything you'd regret later." Stoick narrowed his eyes.

Hiccup colored an entertaining shade of red. "No, dad, believe you me, that's the last thing on my mind."

"Well, I'm sure that you're making the right decision with whatever you've got planned."

"I hope so."

Stoick moved to enter the house, and then declined not to, seeing as Hiccup was waiting patiently outside, he could do the same.

"Hey, dadâ€¦"

"Hmm?"

"I have a inquiry. Umâ€¦whatâ€¦what do you do in a situation ofâ€¦rape?"

The chief looked concerned. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, you knowâ€¦I'm just curious. We've talked about how to handle domestic disputes, marriages, divorce, and almost every other chiefly dutyâ€¦but we've never touched the topic of rape."

"Well, I can see what you mean." Stoick nodded. "Truthfully, everything around and pertaining to rape is messy. No one wins in the end."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it depends on the situation. You know a woman is lawfully considered property, even if she does have equal rights of a

man."

Hiccup rolled his eyes. He knew, but he didn't acknowledge it.

"Well, usually if a victim's husband finds out, he's allowed to kill the one responsible for it. And then, since his property is damaged, he can divorce his wife."

"What if the girl wasn't married yet?"

"Well, then her father would kill the responsible party and the daughter would be disowned from her family and never allowed to marry."

Oh. That wasn't good.

"And if she chose to keep it a secret?" He asked.

"Well, eventually, her father would arrange a marriage, and if she's proven to not be a virgin on her wedding night, she could be killed by her husband."

Oh, even worse. "Yikes." It was as he had feared, extremely difficult to figure out a way out. But he was Hiccup, and she was Astrid, they would figure it out.

"Why rape?" Asked Stoick.

"Oh, just a long thought tangent that led me to the topic." He smiled sheepishly.

"Not to worry though, there hasn't been a rape on a Berk since my father was chief."

"Ah."

A silence stretched between them before Stoick said quietly, "Although, if there was, I have recently learned to be more flexible in the ways of tradition."

Hiccup stood up, regarded his father in quiet understanding and went inside.

After the door shut, the chief frowned hard. "Odin, don't let it be true."

Astrid heard the door shut and jumped a bit.

"It's just me, Astrid." Hiccup said calmly. He heard her sigh. "Feeling better?"

She didn't answer him directly, instead she said, "I didn't know Toothless enjoyed baths so much."

"Did he get in there with you?" The dragon had a nasty habit of doing that to him when he bathed.

"As much as he could." She chuckled.

He suddenly envied his dragon very much. "Toothless!" He beckoned, his face red with embarrassment.

He heard water splashing on the floor and then the dragon slunk out from behind the curtain, drenched.

Hiccup snorted. "Just couldn't help yourself, could you bud? Go on outside and dry off."

At the same time he moved to the door, Stoick came in and had just a few seconds to move before a black blur whizzed passed him. "Got in the bathtub again, ey?" He acknowledged that the curtain was still closed. "Hello Astrid, Hiccup says you'll be staying the night. I apologize for my snoring in advance."

"Oh, my dad snores too." She chuckled. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Anytime, dear." Then he corrected himself. "Well, not any time, I mean!" "Just don't go making this a habit."

"I'll try not to." Her voice was soft.

Stoick went over to the fire, slowly crackling in its place, and threw a few logs on it. Hiccup joined him and waited. He heard Astrid get out, but said nothing.

Many minutes passed before the blonde peeked her head out. Her state of dress was immodest, but it was bed clothes, nothing odd to see. She only wore a long light blue tunic that reached down to her knees, no leggings or any armor to speak of. Her hair was flat to her head, and left little water marks on her shoulders where it hung. Stoick barely glanced her way, but Hiccup was prone to indiscreet gawking.

"Upstairs then?" She asked.

He nodded, swallowing hard. Once he got walking, he began to berate himself for thinking unholy thoughts about her, especially with what happened just yesterday. He followed behind dutifully, just getting a glimpse of bruises that had been hiding by her arm bands and other clothes. Feeling a bit more somber and angry, he met her in his room, as she sat on his bed.

"So?" she said quietly. "What are the sleeping arrangements?"

He smiled to put her at ease. "You'll have my bed, and I'll sleep here on the floor by the door."

"Okay?" "You don't mind?"

"Psh, nah." He waved her off.

She smiled back in gratitude, idly playing with her hair that was now beginning to crimp as it dried.

"I don't think I've ever seen you with your hair down before. You look, uh, really pretty."

His sudden shyness made her grin. "I like to keep it back. It just

suits me. Better for fighting, you know."

He couldn't argue with that. "May Iâ€¦uhâ€¦gods, this is going to sound creepy...um, play with your hair?"

Her eyebrows shot up.

"I mean, if you don't want me to, I understand, I mean, you said you didn't like it when people touched you and oh Thor I'm rambling againâ€¦"

She laughed. "It's fine, Hiccup. I don't mind if you do my hair. I just wasn't expecting it, is all."

"Well, I _do_ know how to braid you know." He said, sitting next to her.

She turned her back to him. "Oh, really?" Finally, he was starting to act like himself. At least he had calmed down from his anger enough to at least pretend everything was normal.

"Yeah, I braided my dad's hair for years after my mom disappeared." He gathered a few tendrils and began to work. "That's my handy work in his beard, you see."

"I thought you had aâ€¦strained relationship with your dad."

"Oh, yes. But the braids held it together." There was a cheekiness in his voice as she felt the tiniest of tugs on her hair.

"Don't worry about hurting me, after years of my mom yanking on my hair, my scalp has no feeling anymore."

He chuckled. "Okay." A few minutes passed before he sighed. "Astrid, are you comfortable here? With me? Because I just assumed this would be a good idea, and I didn't get your say on it."

"I enjoy being with you, Hiccup. I've just been on edge since...the incident. I'm sorry if I come off at all tense." She took a deep breath, consciously trying to calm herself down. "I actually feel much better here than I did at home."

"And, are you okay with me knowing? You didn't willingly tell me what was wrong."

She was silent for far too long.

"I understand. It's embarrassing, and you wanted to hide it, I know. But there's not much we can do about it now."

"Hiccup?" Her voice was gravelly. "what's going to happen to me?"

He tied off the braid and then let go of her hair. "Don't worryâ€¦..."

"I am worrying!" She turned to face him, eyes full of tears. She wanted to shout her fears, but she remembered Stoick downstairs and whispered instead. "There is a possibility that I could be pregnant from this. I can't just hide! What am I going to do Hiccup?!" She blubbered as tears ran rampant.

Ever so gently, he touched her face with just his fingertips.
"Astrid, look at me."

She did.

"You are a strong, proud viking warrior. You aren't going to let theseâ€¦_pigs_ ruin your life. _I'm_ not going to let them ruin your life. I will take care of this, I have your best interest at heart, and I promise that you will not be harmed."

"I'm scared, Hiccup."

"I know your afraid, I'm as scared as you are, but if you're willing to be brave enough for me, things will be alright. Please trust me Astrid, I won't let you down."

She sniffed hard and leaned into his burning touch ever so slightly.
"I trust you."

He smiled back at her. "We should get to sleep. You've had a stressful day."

She nodded empathically and climbed under the covers. She watched him as he took out his shark pillow from the storage rafters, along with a couple blankets.

"Are you warm enough?" He asked.

"I could use one more blanketâ€¦"

Tenderly, he draped it over her and just barely tucked her in. Then, he settled himself on the floor, removing his prosthetic. Finally, he snuffed out the candle on the bedside table.

"Goodnight Astrid."

"Goodnight Hiccup."

A few silent moments passed before Astrid heard the stairs creaking. Unconsciously, she clenched the blankets tighter and held her breath.

"It's just Toothless." Hiccup responded from the floor.

As he was summoned, the black dragon peered up. He finished his ascent and made his way to his bed in the corner, whacking Hiccup in the face in the process.

"Hey, mister!" He snarled back.

The dragon ignored him as he heated his wood and then curled up to sleep.

Astrid smiled at the exchange, then she finally allowed herself to calm down. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could more clearly see her friend. He faced away from her for awhile, but then turned over to face her, where he settled and then finally fell asleep. Astrid spent many long glances admiring his face, how it was changing as he got older. He looked so calm as he slept. His long

eyelashes laying against his cheek. His thick eyebrows unknotted, completely relaxed.

She worried about him. If this whole ordeal had given her tremendous nightmares, what he would have? He had been pleasant about the whole thing, trying to comfort her and put her ease as much as possible, but he was obviously bothered. As she began to give herself a headache, she decided to close her eyes to sleep.

She dreamt of Hiccup. Returning the kisses she owed him for the flowers, holding his hand, and giving him a backbreaking hug, just because. They were small things, hardly considered romantic, but it was what she was longing to do.

His fingers left her palm. His feet carried him away, as he dared not to glance back.

Hiccup?

Hands of accusing vikings pointed behind her, where Fragonard was waiting.

It wasn't my fault.

A wall was built, keeping her back, as words and whispers of 'unclean' hit her ears.

Hiccup! She cried, begging for his protection.

He couldn't hear her.

Hiccup!

Burning hands clutched her and dragged her back. _Good girl! Don't fight it._

She screamed and cried as the poison he had spoke punctured her ears.

_You want this. _

I can't enjoy it if you keep fighting.

_Don't tell anyone. _

You were asking for it.

Astrid shot up in bed, alarmed and awake. Instantly her hand went to her mouth to stifle her sobs. She then noticed that Hiccup was sitting on the edge of the bed, eyes wide with a frozen hand stretched out.

"Hiccup?" She croaked.

"You were shouting in your sleep, and I was about to wake you up. Was it a nightmare?"

Her hand still covering her mouth, she nodded as silent tears began to run down her cheeks.

"Oh! Oh gods, Astrid, please don't cry!" He reached for her, and then stopped, and battled with himself on what to do.

"Hiccup, I swear to Odin, if you tell anyone about what I'm about to do, I'llâ€|I'llâ€|" Her threat fell flat as she gripped the front of his tunic and pulled him closer so she could rest her forehead on his chest.

Hiccup felt her trembling. Seeming like a good idea, he took up the two blankets and wrapped them snugly around her, like a cocoon, and then enveloped her into a hug.

"Is this okay?" He whispered.

She nodded silently.

"Just let it out, I'm here."

She refused to. Her eyes stung with tears as they continued to leak out. She stared at the hands that gripped his tunic, turning white from how tight she coiled.

As she breathed, an occasional sob spilled out. She could feel the muffled heat from Hiccup's hands as he soothed her.

"Hiccup...I'm so sorry..." She hiccuped.

"There's no reason to be."

"Yes, yes there is!" She pulled away from him, but still gripped his tunic. "You care about me deeply! I know that, even if you haven't told me! And now...I'm afraid I've corrupted something beautiful, your regards toward me." She sniffed.

He didn't respond initially, as he was embarrassed. She thought of his affections as something pure. His hands rested on her covered shoulders.

"Nothing could ruin the way I see you." He smiled in the dark. Then he slowly pulled her closer, his actions weak in case she wanted to break free.

She didn't though, just resumed her spot on his chest.

He had lied to her. He did view her differently, she was now broken. Not useless, not disgusting, and definitely not worthless. She was hurt, as was obvious, and needed to be fixed, or put back together. Hiccup knew that his kind nature could heal her wounds, and soon he would have the old, aggressive, tearless Astrid he loved so much.

He just hoped she would forgive him for what he was going to do.

4. Court

I love you guys. I thought I should just let you all know that. :)

* * *

><p>Astrid wasn't quite sure when she had fallen asleep, but when she awoke, she had Hiccup's tunic still clutched in her hands, but not Hiccup. It was still dark, but as she rose, she came to find that it was just Toothless's wings covering her. The reptile curled around her form, sleeping on whatever part of the bed she did not occupy.<p>

Toothless was awake and gave her a gummy smile as she sat up. Astrid affectionately scratched the lizard, and then stood.

"Where's Hiccup?" She asked him.

He responded with a blank stare, indicating that he didn't know.

She quickly dressed and then went down the stairs. Stoick sat by the fire, a wooden duck forming in his hands by his whittling craft.

"Hello sir," she said timidly.

He looked up at her with a strange look and then said, "Good morning, dear." He said, not making eye contact. "Hiccup went out real quick to get some firewood."

"Oh, okay." She replied shakily as she dropped into a nearby chair. Toothless was readily behind her, his tail wrapping around protectively. She smiled at the gesture, knowing that Hiccup had told him to do that.

The chief was silent, and he watched her from the corner of his eyes. Unknown to Astrid, he was very much aware of the problem.

Hiccup had not slept since Astrid began to cry. He had held her the entire night, even after she fell asleep. It was when he heard his father wake up that he removed the shirt in her iron grip, and laid her down to sleep. Hiccup redressed and then posted Toothless on guard duty. The dragon happily obliged as he curled up around her.

Satisfied, the teen went downstairs. "Morning dad." He yawned.

"You're up early." He acknowledged.

"Yeah, I didn't sleep much last night." Then he paused at how bad that sounded.

"Was it Astrid?"

"Uh..."

"Hiccup, I heard you two last night." He got out a block of wood, beginning to whittle. "I woke up when I heard her scream, and I eavesdropped on your conversation."

"Dad, I swear, whatever it sounded like, let me explainâ€"â€|"

"You asked me about rape laws yesterday." He stopped his motions, but did not look at his son. "Was Astrid raped?"

Hiccup covered his face, unable to say it.

His father's voice was calm and consoling. "Hiccup, was she raped?"

"Yes." He sighed. "I didn't do it, if that's what you're worried about."

Stoick had the nerve to bark a feeble laugh. "Oh, I know. She would have killed you before she let that happen."

He shrugged. It was pretty true.

"Who did it?"

"Umâ€¦Fragonard, of the Shivering Shores."

Stoick sighed. "It honestly doesn't surprise me."

"Dad, I promised Astrid I wasn't going to tell anyone, please, please help me with this. I love her to the end of the world and back, don't punish her for something she didn't do."

Stoick was first and foremost a father when it came to Hiccup. He could see the hurt and sorrow in his eyes, and knew he meant every word.

They discussed the topic for about an hour. The chief never raised his voice, as he never had a reason to be angry with son. After all, Hiccup was trying to do the right thing, and that made him proud.

Though, Stoick was angry. Angry because one of his people, a young girl that he cared about, was harmed by guests. It wasn't something to go to war over, but it would cause tension.

Finally, the two came to a draw and Stoick said that they would work something out. Although what, he had no idea.

So, Astrid sat in his presence, not knowing that her fate was in his hands.

The door opened as Hiccup came in. A flower was stuck behind his ear. "Oh, Astrid, you're awake."

She nodded at him.

He dumped the logs by the fire place and then held the flower out to her, between two fingers. He cleared his throat. "Astrid, I have brought you a lily today, for the roses were frail, and the petals fell away."

"Did you come up with that yourself?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, I enjoy rhymes."

"It was clever." She grinned. "Quite the poet you are."

Roses and lilies really did look quite similar. One grew from the ground, the other, on water. He must have had one heck of a time

retrieving it for her. She plucked the white and yellow blossom and stuck it in her braid.

Stoick stood up, finished with his carving. "I guess I should make breakfast. Eggs and mutton fine with you two?"

"Yeah, sounds good." Hiccup licked his lips.

"Iâ€¦I'm not hungryâ€¦" Astrid said shyly.

"Bread for the lass then." Stoick said passively.

Throughout the meal, conversation was meager, and mostly one sided from Hiccup. The boy was a chatterbox and had the tendency to ramble when he was nervous. Stoick kept glancing at Astrid, and Hiccup sensed it was making her uncomfortable.

"Did you want to say something, dad?" He tried to defuse the tension.

"Oh," He cleared his throat. "Did you sleep well last night, Astrid?"

"Oh, yes, much better than I had been."

"That's nice." He pushed his eggs around. "Just curiousâ€¦why here? I mean, you obviously must have rather spent the night at the Thorenson's, right?"

"Hiccup volunteered, actually. It was his idea that I spend the night away from home."

"That's Hiccup for ya, always looking out for his friends."

Hiccup grinned proudly and blushed at the compliment. "Hey!" He suddenly had an idea. "Let's go take a morning flight together! I usually go with Toothless, but the more the merrier!" And the more he could keep Astrid away from Fragonard.

"Great!" Said she, starting to warm up to her old self again.

So, after the meal, the teens and Toothless began the familiar walk to the Hofferson's. "Astrid, I have an idea that may help you."

She raised an eyebrow for him to elaborate.

"Unconsciously, you're making yourself smaller, shrugging your shoulders, crossing your arms, keeping your head down, but if you walk big, and act like you own Berk, you really will start to feel better."

"You really think it would work?"

"That's what I used to do, before, well, you know. I tried to make myself small, in an effort to be invisible. But in reality, I just opened myself up for more ridicule."

She looked at him sadly. "I'm sorry..."

"No, don't even start." He held up a finger. "I did not say that to

make you feel worse." Then he grinned. "Now stand up straight, chest out, head high."

She did as he instructed, and really did begin to feel more empowered.

Unfortunately, someone was glaring at them from the shadows.

"Hey!" He shouted.

Automatically, Astrid darted behind Hiccup.

Fragonard stood before them, his countenance full of hate and a black eye rich and dark with color.

"It's pay back time for yesterday, maggot."

"Oh, did daddy change you after you soiled yourself?" Hiccup countered.

"Funny, how would you like another bloody nose?"

"How would you like another black eye?"

Astrid stood behind Hiccup, clutching his tunic again, dreading a fight.

Fragonard noticed it. "You would think for all the intimidation she was putting off and how feisty she was, she wouldn't be so cowardly."

"Cowardly?!" Astrid suddenly perked up, letting go of Hiccup, and stepping forward. "Listen here, youâ€"..." However, she was unable to finish as Frag lashed out and grabbed her wrist. Her nostrils flared and she grit her teeth as she tried to pull away.

His grip was relentless and panic rose in Astrid as flashbacks pulsed in her mind, her arm throbbing and practically sizzling.

"Hands off, Frag." Hiccup's voice was deep and sinister as his face filled with contempt.

"Swing first." He smirked.

The boy snarled and clenched his fist, ready to fight, but they were interrupted as Toothless swept into the scene and roared in Fragonard's face.

The older boy tore away from the group and stumbled back quickly. Toothless growled, slowly coming towards him. He clamored over the ground, keeping his eyes riveted on the dragon. He spared a glance at the couple, then ran as fast as his feet would carry him.

It wasn't until Fragonard left that Hiccup realized that he was holding Astrid possessively, in a vice grip. He quickly let go. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean toâ€"are you alright?"

Astrid stood stricken and slightly confused. Fragonard's touch had been like hellfire, even through the fabric of her arm wraps, but

Hiccup's, that was something different. He had touched skin, and it was soothing, it was calm and tender, even though it wasn't a gentle grip. She attributed it to the adrenaline rush.

"I changed my mind." She said quietly.

"About what?"

"Can I just ride with you on Toothless?"

His eye brows furrowed. "Are you sure?"

She just nodded. He shrugged and motioned for his Nightfury. "Wait, I still want to home, I want to get something."

He sighed. "Whatever you say."

At the Hofferson house, Astrid was the first in the door. "It's just me," She stated. "And Hiccup. I'm just going to grab something real quick, then we're going flying."

"Oh, that's nice dear." Mrs. Hofferson wiped her hands on her apron. "Did you sleep better last night?"

"Much, thanks for letting me go." She went to go upstairs, but her father intercepted her by an arm around the waist.

"You didn't give me a chance to give you a kiss." He teased.

"Dad..." She groaned and tried to get away. As his arm tightened, her fighting became more adamant. She felt like she was suffocating.

"Okay, okay. I get it, you don't want me kissing you in front of your boyfriend."

She colored, but didn't correct him.

Her father let her go and she clamored up the steps.

Hiccup watched her to with longing scrawled all over his face.

Mr. Hofferson smiled. "Any day now, hmm?"

"What?"

"'What' he says. As if he doesn't think about it all the time!"

"I'm...really not sure what you mean..."

"The proposal! What else?!"

Oh damn. Hiccup's eyes widened. "And how soon are you...anticipating this for?"

Mr. Hofferson was quiet for just a moment. "You mean, you weren't considering it?"

"I mean, I was, but not _now_." He turned very _very_ red. "Our relationship is very...one sided." He stated sheepishly.

"Nonsense! She adores you!"

"Mr. Hofferson!"

"Please, call me dad!"

"Oh gods...look, I love Astrid, butâ€"..." He was unable to finish his sentence as Astrid came down the stairs. She shed her armored skirt and shoulder pads, in favor for a thick, fur lined jacket with a hood. She was fiddling with it when she came down.

"Are you harassing Hiccup, dad?" She smiled knowingly.

The man patted his head affectionately. "No, just teasing."

Up in the air, Astrid clung to Hiccup, going as far as to wrap her legs around his waist. Her fingers dug into his pecs, as her face buried into his shoulder blades. Toothless did corkscrews, suicide dives, vertical lifts, and glided across the water. Hiccup smiled all the while enjoying the thrill, and thought that she was too. But then, he turned to look at her, only to see her eyes screwed shut in fear, just like the first time they flew together.

Terrified, Hiccup leveled out to a serene glide. As they swooped through the rosy clouds, and savored the warm sunlight, Hiccup was hopeful she would recover. But then, he glanced back and saw her still gripped with fear.

"Are you okay, Astrid?"

Truth be told, she loved flying. There was nothing wrong with being up in the air. But now that she was safe, far away with Fragonard, and alone with him, she sought out his warmth for comfort.

"I'm fine," she returned with a tender smile.

He simpered, knowing it would do no good badger her. "Okay. Let me know when you've had enough."

When they finally landed, it was mid noon, because Astrid's starving stomach was finally begging for food. Upon dismount, Snotlout was on them like a hawk.

"Man, you guys are in soo much trouble! Fragonard's going around telling everyone you set Toothless on him! For no reason!"

Astrid gasped, "no!"

In contrast, Hiccup replied calmly, "you know I would never use Toothless unless it was for a good reason."

"That's what we were all saying, but the chiefs are convening over the incident right now!"

"They can't! We aren't there!" Said Astrid in despair.

"Well, you guys were gone!"

"Come on!" Cried Hiccup, grabbing Astrid's hand.

Within moments, they were in reach of the Grand Hall and Hiccup threw the doors open.

"Wait!"

All heads sitting at the table turned and looked.

Stoick seemed relieved. "Glad you could join us, son."

Both teens sat next to each other as the Hoffersons, Gobber, Spitelout, Hamish, and Fragonard looked on.

"Where's the dragon?" Asked the chief of the Shivering Shores.

"I left him outside."

Stoick straightened up. "Would you like to explain to us this accusation of a dragon attack?"

Hiccup stood. "Yes, first of all, Toothless did attack Fragonard."

"He admits it!" Frag shouted.

Stoick held up his hand. "But...?"

"He was defending us. Besides, this so called attack was just pushing him away from us. He didn't even hurt him, just growled."

"Then where did he get the black eye?"

Hiccup's lips tightened and answered, "I gave it to him."

Spitelout cracked a smile. "You gave it to him?"

"Yes, and I had good reason, too. He was making lewd comments towards Astrid."

"Like what?" Asked Hamish.

"He called her some vulgar names and suggested that he wanted to have more fun with her." Hiccup said, his nose flaring.

"More fun?" Mr. Hofferson raised, leaning forward in his seat. "What's that supposed to mean?" He looked at his daughter.

Gobber tried to be helpful. "I think it means that she was previously harassed."

"What kind of harassment are we talking about? Heckling?" Hamish asked.

Astrid and Hiccup were silent.

Stoick looked patiently over to Fragonard. "Care to shed some light on the situation?"

Fragonard had a different mindset in this trial. He was in complete denial that he did anything wrong, and if he was charged as guilty, nothing could be done about it. He was the son of a visiting chief, no reason to face consequences. The boy rolled his shoulder and in three obscene and offensive words, he made it very clear what the real problem was. The fist fight was immediately forgotten.

Mr. Hofferson jumped to his feet. "This is outrageous! What are you going to do about this Stoick?!"

"Hey, it wasn't my fault!" The kid shouted.

"Not your fault?!" Hamish shouted back at his son. "Do you know how much trouble your in!?"

"She started it!" He pointed at Astrid.

The blonde sank in her seat as her dad glared at her from across the room.

Spitelout was the one to ask, "What are we going to do about this? Have her sequestered?"

Astrid anticipated that response and ducked her head.

"We could marry them," suggested Hamish.

Astrid screwed her eyes shut. That would completely end her.

"We'll worry about that later," started Stoick. "Astrid, why don't you tell us what happened?" he asked, calmly.

She sat up and looked towards Hiccup for confirmation.

He grasped her hand under the table.

Her unease was in her voice. "I heard someone in the armory, so I went in and checked it out. I thought at first it was Hiccup, dropping off some weapons, but it turned out to be Fragonard and the two younger boys." She swallowed hard. "They were stealing from us, and I told them off, and then they jump me and—" She looked down. "He raped me."

"Why didn't you fight back?" Mr. Hofferson slammed his fist into the table.

"I tried! But I was exhausted and they were stronger than me—"

"Excuses!" Her father shouted.

"Theft! Rape! Picking fights with the chief's son! What's to be done!?" Gobber shouted. Really, he was milking this, trying to get Fragonard off the island.

"Let's hear my son's side of the story." Hamish tried.

"I don't think there's any reason to." Stated Hiccup, finally.

"Why not?"

"He said so himself. Heâ€|raped her." He substituted the word that Fragonard had said. "There is absolutely no excuse."

Hamish looked to Stoick, desperate.

The chief sighed. "Fine, Fragonard, what do you think happened?" If anything, everyone would see the boy's sure stupidity.

"Okay, first of all, we weren't stealing anything, we were borrowing."

Gobber rolled his eyes and muttered, "Yeah, right."

"And second of all, she came in and practically told us to have sex."

"What did she say, exactly?" Stoick asked.

"Okay, so she didn't really say anything towards it, but it was in her body language."

"No, Fragonard, I asked for what she said." The chief was firm.

The teen sighed, "Fine. She told us to keep 'our filthy mitts off of her' and then I insinuated my intentions, and she said, 'Don't you dare.'"

"And that wasn't enough of a clue for you to back off?"

"Well, she came in there swinging her hips and looking all hot and flustered! It's not my fault!"

Gobber shook his head. "That's how she always looks."

Astrid cupped her hand over her mouth, suddenly feeling sick. Had she caused her own downfall, just by appearance? That wasn't something she could help. That wasn't fair.

Hiccup rose, "I agree with Fragonard that Astrid is very alluring." She whirled on him, in horror, but he smiled faintly at her, in ease. "But that's what makes her Astrid. A strong beautiful young woman, that uses her looks to intimidate others. In our culture, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that." Then, he confessed in front of all these people, "I find myself at a loss for words when I am with her. My knees are weak and I'm sweating profusely. I have spent many nights thinking about her, too. So, yes, he's right, she is very attractive." Then he took on a totally different mood, one of anger and chagrin. "The difference between us? I have not so much as breathed on Astrid without her permission." He stared daggers at the offender, "You are entirely at fault in this situation, as you lack self-control!"

"You want self-control?! I'll show you self-control!" Fragonard attempted to climb on the table, but Hamish pulled him down instantly.

Stoick pounded on the table when he saw things getting out of hand.

"I can see anger is getting the best of most of us. I think it would be best if we all took a break."

Astrid loved that idea and practically ran from the hall. However, she kept her emotions in check as Hiccup dutifully followed behind.

Once outside, Astrid wheeled around instantly and backhanded Hiccup across his cheeks. He didn't dignify himself with a response.

"You promised that they wouldn't find out! You said everything would be okay! I trusted you, dammit! My life is ruined! Are you happy!?"

No, he wasn't and she could visibly tell that he felt awful. "I'm so sorry Astrid." He breathed.

She whimpered as she realized she had yelled at the only person that supported her through this entire situation. She opened her mouth to rectify it, but a heavy hand fell on her shoulder.

Trembling, she looked up to the face of her father, whose face was livid with fury. But his voice was scarily calm. "Astrid, I would like a word with you." Then he looked pointedly at Hiccup. "Alone."

The chief's son nodded and headed back up to the hall. But at the last second, he hid behind a post and eavesdropped on their conversation, just knowing it was going to be bad.

Axel Hofferson stared at his daughter in disappointment. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking about the tribe, dad!" She insisted. "I went in there because I thought they were stealing. I didn't know they wouldâ€"â€"I never would have thoughtâ€"!"

"But it happened."

"You don't think I don't know that?! I tried, dad, I really did!"

"But it wasn't _enough_â€"!"

"Papaâ€"!"

"I'm sorry Astrid."

"What does that mean? Why are you saying that?"

He knew the law. He knew what was going to happen, and as much as he loved his daughter, he also knew what had to be done. "Astrid, I can no longer call you my daughter."

"_Whatâ€"?_" She breathed.

"I'm sorry, but that's the way it has to be." And he began to turn his back on her.

She grabbed up his arm. "Papaâ€"pleaseâ€"I beg youâ€"!" Tears

threatened to fall, but he would not look at her. "Don't leave me."

"No, Astrid." He said firmly.

"Please!" She cried. "Don't do this to me!"

"No, child!" He said again, raising his arm.

"PAPA!" She wailed one last time,

"**No!**" And he swept her arm off and pushed her back. She fell feebly on the steps as he hurried away, not looking back.

"Papa!" She bemoaned. It wasn't fair. None of it was fair. She sat on the steps, feeling like a lost child. Anything could happen to her now, for she was completely and utterly alone.

Or so she thought. A soft click came from her side before Hiccup sat next to her. He said not a word, and didn't look at her, but his presence was enough. She glanced over to him and noticed that her slap had left a mark, and it looked like it still stung.

Swallowing hard, she said, "I don't want to go back in there."

"Then don't." He said calmly. "Take Stormfly and go to the cove. Wait for me there."

"You?"

"I'll represent you here. I can't imagine it would be easy to listen to them talking about you like some kind of prize to be gained."

"More like some burden to be rid of." She said sardonically.

"Could you try trusting me again? Just for a little while?"

She turned to smile at him sadly. "I don't really have any other option."

5. Capitulation

There could have been a hurricane and she wouldn't have noticed. Astrid was so completely miserable, that she had shut herself off from the outside world and refused to come out of her sorrow induced bubble.

That's how Hiccup found her.

She sat on a rock in the cove, the very same she sat on as she sharpened her axe all those months ago. Now, she had her ankles crossed, her arms on her knees, and her head tucked in her arms, in an effort to quell the pain.

The meeting had been a long one, exhausting, and Hiccup was sure he would have given up halfway through. But this was about Astrid, and so they all argued. But as Stoick stated earlier, everything pertaining to rape was messy, and no one involved came out

okay.

Now, including him.

It was late evening now, the sun setting, the air getting a bite to it. Hiccup gathered some wood, letting Astrid alone for the time being. He made a small pile before Toothless and Stormfly caught on to what he was doing. Easily, they made themselves busy gathering sticks and the like.

Astrid heard the sound of fire igniting. She looked up, a bit startled, only to see a nice fire going, and Hiccup supervising it.

He turned to check on her, and their eyes met.

She turned away. "So, what's the verdict?"

Hiccup saw no point in beating around the bush, but still it wasn't the easiest news to deliver. He just hoped she wouldn't shoot the messenger. "You...You're getting married." He stumbled.

Her reserved reaction surprised him. She nodded silently, already accepting her fate. A part of her knew that this was likely to be the outcome. Marry Fragonard, because he would need to restore honor to his tribe, and right his wrongs.

If only it didn't feel like she was being sentenced to _death_.

She glanced back to Hiccup and frowned. "Don't look at me like that."

So much sadness was leaking from his face, and yet, he smiled in an effort to comfort her.

"I don't need your pity." She confirmed, looking away.

He took a few steps closer, and waited for her to speak.

"You wouldn't understand how I feel. Youâ€¦|You wouldn't know what it's like to be hated by everyone you know...for something you couldn't help! You don't know what it's like to be disowned from your family, to lose everything. You don't know what it's like to live in constant fear and to have long-endless nights, filled with nightmares. You don't know what it's like to be forced into a fate, and have nothing to do with itâ€¦|and you certainly wouldn't know what it's like to have a part of you completely_ ruined_ just because you were trying to do the right thing!" She crudely wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "You wouldn't understandâ€¦|"

At this point, Hiccup was now right next to the rock, looking up at her with a still-sympathetic smile. "Really, Astrid? Are you sure?"

She stopped. Had she really just said that? She basically just summed up his life story, and said that he wouldn't fathom her pain. If anything, he was the only person who_ could_ sympathize with her.

"Hiccupâ€¦|I'mâ€¦|I'm soâ€¦|"

"Forget about it. I didn't say it to make you feel worse." He combed a bit of his hair back. "I said itâ€¦because I wanted you to know that you aren't alone. I know how much it hurtsâ€¦and I had fifteen years to learn to cope. You've only had a few hours. If I was youâ€¦I'd be crying so much harder. You are so _strong,_ Astrid."

"But I'm not." She pushed her bangs away from her face. Her tears had loosed the paint and it had smeared everywhere.

Delicately, he reached out and cradled her hand. "Astrid, you and I both know you're much tougher than I am. You're more brave, and a better fighterâ€¦but just for a little while...could we pretend that _I'm_ the one protecting _you_?"

"Oh gods yes!" And she slid off the rock and sought refuge in his arms.

And so she cried. The great Astrid Hofferson was reduced to a weak, fragile girl. She had no courage to face the scoundrel that defiled her, to tell anyone about what happened.

And she hid behind her best friend that just happened to get involved in this situation. She was pathetic, yet here Hiccup was, holding her anyways. She attempted to speak, to thank him for all he had done, to apologize for treating him badlyâ€¦to say goodbye, but she just couldn't speak.

"Astrid, since you're already cryingâ€¦maybe I should tell you the worst part."

She minutely stifled her sobs and nodded against him, willing to listen to her lot.

His hand came up to cradle her head, ever so gently petting her hair. "Youâ€¦You're marrying _me_."

She was elated and relieved, but anyone watching at that moment would have thought otherwise. Her fingers dug into his rib cage as she wailed into his chest. Stormfly and Toothless looked up in fear, since she sounded like she was being brutally murdered.

Any joy Hiccup may have had was crushed at that moment, as he held his darling closer. "I'm so sorry, Astrid. I know I'm not on the top of the list for marriageâ€¦" He at least hoped she would see the positives. "You can still be independent though!"

She pulled away and looked at him with soaked cheeks and runny nose. "Howâ€¦How could youâ€¦?"

He wanted to look away, not able to bare all the pain that was on her face, but he met her gaze. His voice was very soft. "I just thoughtâ€¦That maybe it was a better idea then making you marry Fragonard, or to be put up by Mildewâ€¦because nowâ€¦if you didn't marry meâ€¦well, you'd have no home, no future. I didn't think you'd be so heart brokenâ€¦I meanâ€¦am I that awful?"

Her eyes widened as she realized that her message was misconstrued. She offered a simper, "No, Hiccup." She sniffed hard and wiped her

eyes. "I meantâ€|how could you marry me?"

He managed a smirk. "Well, it's actually pretty simple. My dad will do the ceremony, probably at high noonâ€|"

She stopped him with a patient hand on his shoulder. He actually got her to chuckled a little before she sobered. "_Why_ would you want to marry _me_?"

He was stunned. "Why Astrid, you think this changes things?"

She tilted her head, trying to follow.

"Everyone was already talking about us. Your dad even asked me about it. If we had continued as we were, I'm sure my dad would have arranged somethingâ€|but maybe a bit later down the road." He shrugged. "But who knows, the way they were talking, they probably would have wanted it sooner than later."

"But they don't think that anymore!" She added. "My parents don't want me, Hiccup! How could the chief want me as a daughter in law? Howâ€|How could _you_ want me? I'm damaged goods." She shut her eyes tight. "You deserve the best. The purest. You can't get anything from me. I have no dowry, no money, no family name. Iâ€|" She started crying all over again. "Hiccup, he did so much damage, I don't know if I can give you an heirâ€|" She shook her head slowly. "You don't want meâ€|"

"Yes. Yes, I do." He confirmed.

She raised her eyes to his, seeing them shimmering with his own tears.

"Because I _love_ you."

She knew it. Everyone had told her. But hearing it come out of his mouth was totally different. Affirming, reassuring, pleasant. She cupped her mouth, holding back any sound lest they betray her. "You do?"

He snatched up her arms and nearly shouted. "It isn't obvious!?" His virescent orbs bored into hers, in a possessive manner. "I've been pining after you since I can remember. Before I met Toothless, you were the only thing that kept me sane."

"How can that be? I was awful to you back then."

"Not really. Sure, we weren't friends, and sure, you thought I was a mess. But you never teased me. Occasionally, you even stood up for me. Times like that, I thought that Odin was smiling down on me. The only reason I pressed on, kept trying to kill a dragon, was to impress you."

Wow. She was humbled. "Thank you. You didn't need to kill one to impress me...just train one." She ended with a smirk.

He smiled at that. "Then you agree with the deal? You'll marry me?"

"If you'll have me." She said, shyly.

With that, he pulled her into a gentle hug. "I'd love to have you."

She allowed him to hold her, a loose embrace. She spoke as she rested her head on his collarbone. "Hiccup, what happened to Fragonard? Did he get punished?"

"Of course he did. He's being...beheaded."

Astrid looked up at him, wide eyed. Yes, she was glad he was getting his just desserts, but she didn't expect something so brutal. "Well, good. I didn't like his snobbish face anyway."

"Um..." Hiccup turned red. "A different head."

She blinked. "So...castrated?"

"Uh, yeah, basically." He cleared his throat. "It was my idea. That way, he has to live the rest of his life with his decision, and he'll warn others of what can happen."

"Who has the honor of doing it?"

"My dad's going to ask your dad if he wanted to."

"My father doesn't care..." She said sadly.

"Of course he does, Astrid. He's just...very angry right now. It won't last forever."

She considered him. "Maybe, I suppose."

"He loves you, Astrid. He's heartbroken over this."

"No, he's heartbroken because he lost property. He won't get anything from me!"

He hushed her. "Hey hey, it's okay..."

"And now, I'm finally getting married to you like they always wanted and it's under the worst conditions and they can't be happy for me!"

"I'm sure they'll come around." He dabbed her cheeks with his sleeve. "Until then, my father's having it arranged for you to stay with us. It makes sense...really."

"When's the wedding?"

"Um, Frigg's day."

Oh gods, that was two days from now. "That soon?"

"We have to. If you are...pregnant..."

"This is going to be suspicious. What is everyone going to think?"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "You know I don't care what others

think. And neither should you."

"Yeah but..."

"Let them think whatever. It doesn't matter."

"I wish I could be so sure."

"We faced a dragon the size of a mountain together. I'm sure we can face some gossiping Vikings."

She actually smiled. "When you put it that way, it doesn't sound so bad."

He took her hand as he noticed the sun had set. "We don't need to go back, not until you're ready."

"Okay." And she followed him to the fire. They sat in silence, resting against Toothless' warm underbelly. Hiccup reached over and pulled the basket that he brought with him closer. "We didn't eat lunch, you must be starving!" He took out bread, cheese, and smoked ham.

"No, Hiccup—I'm not hungry."

He studied her with worrisome eyes. "Please? You barely had anything for breakfast, or dinner last night."

"I feel like I'm going to puke."

He looked at her, then at the sandwich in his hand. "Then I won't eat either." And he put the food away.

"Oh, please. You're actually hungry. Please eat."

"Nope. If you refuse to, then we'll starve and die together."

"Don't do this to yourself."

"I'm doing it."

Oh, he was good. "Fine, I'll eat."

He smiled and handed her the meal. Turns out, he knew what he was talking about, since she actually felt less sick after she ate.

She bumped shoulders with him. "So, what happens next? Do we tell the others? Are they going to announce our engagement?"

He rested a gentle hand on her head. "Let's worry about that when we come to it." Not even thinking, he leaned in and placed a kiss on her temple.

Astrid flinched and jerked away, like she had been burned. He berated himself. "Oh gods, I'm...that was stupid. I'm so sorry!"

She stopped him. "It's okay. Just...ask next time."

"Okay." He raised his arm in an attempt to put it around her, but

stopped, seeking approval. She nodded.

He wasn't quite sure how to say what he wanted, but he tried, stuttering all the way. "You can seek comfort from me anyway you want. I-I can do whatever you needâ€¦or ask."

She nodded, and then swung her legs over his. Her cheek rested against his frantic beating heart, but she found it so soothing.

Hiccup was bright red in the face. In just a little under an hour, they had gone from being best of friends, to engaged. He even came right out and told her he loved her. Having her this close to him made him all types of nervous, but he would have to learn to get used to it.

"Hiccup?" She whispered. "Could you recite some more poetry like you did earlier?"

"With the flowers?"

"Yeah. I want to get my mind on other things."

"You don't want to hear my poems. They're lame and cheesy."

"I didn't think so. Just a little bit. Besides, it wouldn't be a Hiccup-y poem if it weren't cheesy."

He chuckled. "Oh great." He was silent for moment as the thought. "Oh! Can Iâ€¦sing it to you?"

She glanced up to him. "I don't think I've ever heard you sing before."

"I don't. But I can." He smirked ever so slightly. "I came up with it myself, just whistling in the forgeâ€¦nothing intentional, but you knowâ€¦just something to occupy my mind."

"I'm sure it'll be nice."

He dipped his head to her ear and started to hum. Then he began to sing, very softly. "_Climbing rose on the wall, pick it now, before the petals fall. Apple ripe on the bough, take it, for the time to take is now_."

His speaking voice may have been comical, cracking and nasally, but his singing voice was throaty and raw. Deep and sonorous, and ringing just like a bell.

"_So my love, oh, my love. We'll watch the showers, that kiss the flowers. Perhaps we'll do the same. And I am hopin', your heart will open, like roses in the rain_."

Astrid felt an overwhelming peace on her soul as her trembling ceased. His voice was so powerful, that he demanded all of her attention.

Hiccup pulled away from her a little as his volume stretched as his tenor echoed in the cove.

"_Nothing is forever, always is a lie. I can only love you till the day I die_."

At her spot on his chest, she could hear his rich timbre reverberating in his rib cage. She wanted to fall asleep right there, and forget the world. His callous hand delicately rested on her crown, her golden locks slipping between his fingers. He finished softly, his chin tapping her forehead ever so gently. "_Before the rain goes, we'll look for rainbows. That bloom in lovers lane, till sunlight settles, upon the petals... _

_"Of roses in the rain"

She didn't respond initially. Her skin rose ever so slightly into goosebumps as she let the heat from his chest seep into her cheek.

"You should stick to dragon training." She teased.

He laughed.

"You're voice is nice. You should sing more often."

"I'll keep that in mind. Maybe I'll yodel from dragon back."

"Now, that is not what I mean!" She scoffed, meeting his eyes.

"I know." He smirked.

Content, she took up her spot once again.

As they sat together, Astrid got an awful sinking feeling in her heart. He sacrificed so much for her, held her, comforted her, and loved her. Yet, he never asked how she felt about him, if she returned his feelings. It was humbling, knowing that he wasn't trying to make it about himself.

"Hiccup?" She asked softly.

"Hmm?"

"I-..." For some reason, even though it would have been easy to just say, 'I love you, too,' she couldn't bring herself to do it. She couldn't lie to him. She didn't love him back. Liked, yes, but love was such a strong term, and she was sure that she couldn't feel that way towards him.

Could she?

"I think I'm ready to go back. I'm tired" She finished. Someday, one day, she would be able to say it. But until then, she just hoped she wasn't breaking his heart.

He smiled. "Okay."

When they landed at the chief's home, Astrid would be the first to admit that she was stalling. She couldn't go in there. This would be the first time she would see Stoick after they had a mutual understanding of her condition. There used to be such respect and adoration in his eyes.

She wasn't ready to see it eclipsed with contempt and malice.

Still, he agreed to let her marry Hiccup, so maybe she shouldn't have been so afraid.

"Astrid?" Hiccup's soft voice spoke in the dark.

"I'm coming." She answered, and dismounted Stormfly.

He held out his hand to her, and she took it graciously. He was the one to open the door to the house. Stoick was sitting right there, waiting by the fire.

"Look who decided to finally come home." He smirked.

"Yeah, well, we needed to get some fresh air." Hiccup really wished that the chief would just stay quiet about the situation. But it seemed he had other plans.

"It's pretty late, son."

"I knowâ€|"

Astrid intervened. "I didn't want to come back." She spoke, quietly. "It's my fault we were late."

To her upmost surprise and joy, the look of respect and adoration had stayed, but with it came one of pity and disappointment. "I see," he said. "And are you feeling better?"

She looked to the ground in shame.

"Lass, take all the time you need. We'll be here for you."

She nodded, but didn't look up. Stoick approached her and pulled her into a warm embrace. At first, she was unsettled, but then she felt the truth in his hold and returned it. A fatherly hug was what she really needed at that moment.

Stoick then held out his hand to his son, and Hiccup came closer. The father then rested a hand on the cheeks of both kids and looked at them seriously.

"I am proud of you two. No matter what anyone says. You should be proud of yourselves. I love you both, very much." He nodded. "But I'm going to tell you this now, and I want you to listen. These next few days are going to be absolute Helheim, but if you two just stick together, you'll get through it. Marriage isâ€|a lot like dragon training." He smiled at his analogy. "It begins and ends with trust, but it needs support and understanding."

"Hiccup, you need to know that Astrid won't be able to 'just get over it' no matter how long it seems. You must be prepared to hold her when she needs it, and be slow to anger."

The teen nodded heavily.

"Astrid, you must know that this is hard for Hiccup. He's giving up a lot for you, and he deserves your respect. Treat him kindly, and also

be slow to anger."

"I know, and I will." She whispered.

Stoick nodded. "Then, you two will make it." Then he sighed. "I really wish you didn't have to go through with itâ€|but sometimes, life just isn't fair."

"Yeah, that's a sad reality." Hiccup simpered. "But one I'm used to."

Astrid gave a soft glance.

Finally, Stoick removed his grip on them. "It's been a long day. Iâ€|I'll be announcing your engagement in the morning. Just so you know."

With silence sufferance, they both agreed. Hiccup took Astrid's hand once again and led her upstairs. From the stairs, she saw that the loft had been fitted with a curtain for privacy. For that, she was thankful.

In what would be her new room, Astrid came to a painful halt. All of her belongings had been moved in. Even her bed. It sat about a foot apart from Hiccup's. Far on the other end of the room, a pale blue dress hung, and elicited tears from the girl.

Her mother's wedding dress.

Attached to it was a note, written by her mother's hand.

_Astrid, _

We will always love you.

"Then why does it feel like you don't?" She choked, aloud.

Hiccup said nothing, but awkwardly glanced around the room, taking inventory of what was added and what had been moved. Hanging from a ribbon by the window was a bouquet of roses, that made his mouth open.

"You kept them." He stated.

The blonde turned to him in question, then followed his gaze to the flowers. "Oh, yeah." She resigned. "That reminds me." She approached him with soft steps. She stood just a bit on tip toes, and cradled his face delicately. Then, she placed one soft kiss on each cheek. "Thank you."

His eyes slid shut as he absorbed the touch. She was willing to give it to him, and he would willingly take it and accept it.

Astrid pulled away and sauntered over to her bed. She flopped down on it, pathetically. Then the tears came naturally. Just three days ago, life was simple and normal. She had her friends and family, she had training and dragons, all was well. But now, everything she knew was changing. Her family didn't want her, she estranged from her friendsâ€|and she was to be married, living with a boy. It was all just so much at one time. Overwhelmed, she wept into her

pillow.

Hiccup stood awkwardly nearby as she broke down. She had cried so much in that day already, he was surprised her tear-ducts still worked. He looked to Toothless for guidance.

In his own silent way, the dragon expressed what needed to be heard. "Comfort her, you dolt."

But what was he supposed to do? The words, "It'll be okay, you'll be fine," were stale and bitter now. Astrid knew everything would work out, it would insult her intelligence to say it. He supposed, that this weeping was just her soul mourning for the loss of a perfect future, and the shock of her whole world begin ripped apart.

Quickly, he left the room.

Astrid heard his prosthetic click on the floor, and allowed herself to cry just the tiniest amount louder, now that she was alone. It wasn't but a few minutes later that he returned. The young woman paid him no mind, and he gingerly removed her boots and belt and then covered her with a blanket. He untied her braid and loosed her hair. Finally, she heard the planks of the bed creak as he sat next to her. She heard dripping water before a cold, wet cloth touched upon her cheek and swollen eyelids.

It was palliative, and she allowed him to continue his soft ministrations, until at last, her tears came to an end. Exhausted, she didn't bother to open her eyes. Hiccup assumed she was asleep, and so he dropped a kiss atop her head. "Sweet dreams, milady." He whispered.

The blonde listened, and found him crawling into his own bed and blowing out the candle.

Maybe, for the first time in many nights, she would have sweet dreams.

6. Consequences

You guys realize this isn't over right? Still a handful of chapters left. But seriously guys, you are all awesome and beautiful and I love you.

* * *

><p>In the morning, Astrid awoke with a yawn. She was rested, and her muscles were pleasantly recovered from their previous sore state. It was a new dawn, a new day, fresh and ready for change. With her recharged state, she was ready for what was to come.<p>

Or so she hoped.

Toothless was still curled up on his slate and Hiccup, likewise, was cuddled into his sheets. The blonde reclined for a moment and watched him in slumber. His hair was ruffled, no doubt from a night of tossing and turning. Bags were already under his eyes. She sighed.

He hadn't slept well.

It was then that Toothless began to stir. He blinked his large feline eyes open and stretched out his claws, flexing the sleep away.

"Toothless," She whispered.

He approached her and sniffed her.

"Let's let Hiccup have some more sleep."

He gave a dragon-like shrug and headed down the stairs. This early in the morning, he didn't care who fed him, as long as he could eat.

Astrid was very well aware that Toothless was spoiled and lazy. He would not go hunting for breakfast, but wait for Hiccup to bring it to him. It was a nasty habit, she would admit. Her Nadder, on the other hand, enjoyed her morning flights over the ocean. She would preen and gaze at herself lovingly, and then dive in and catch her breakfast. This time, Astrid would take a fishing net and bring back her catch for Toothless.

"Morning Lass, you're up early." Stoick noted as she came down the steps.

"Yeah, I slept like a rock! Hiccup is still sleeping thoughâ€|better let him be."

"Oh, were you two up late chatting?"

"No, I could just tell he didn't sleep well."

Placated, the giant man shrugged and went to grab his morning wood-working. "Where are you off to?"

Astrid finished tying on her boots. "To get breakfast for the dragons."

"Alone?"

"I have Stormfly." She smirked. "Uh, would I get in trouble for impaling Fragonard if he cornered me?"

He rubbed his chin. "I doubt you'll see much of that boy today. Still recovering from his 'surgery'."

She grinned. "Well, then nothing to worry about! I'll see you later!" And she sashayed out the door.

The chief smiled with melancholy. You almost couldn't tell she was hurting.

About an hour later, she arrived at the house, fish basket in hand. Toothless bounded around her like an excited kitten.

"I'm back!" She called. The lack of reply told her that the chief had already set out for his duties. "Is he still sleeping?" She asked

Toothless.

The dragon ignored her and tore into his breakfast.

She skipped up the stairs, to find their room empty, both beds made.

She screwed up her lips. "Huh."

Astrid supposed she would find him in the Great Hall. And so, there she went. The blonde pushed through the large doors, and eyes turned to greet the person who entered.

Though, when they saw who it was, they just as quickly turned back around. Astrid felt dismay and dread in her gut as a tense feeling dropped throughout the room. She swallowed hard.

A hand raised up in the back caught her attention, and she found Hiccup smiling at her. Relieved, she jogged over to join him and their friends.

"And how are we this morning, milady?" He asked, genteelly.

"Much better then yesterday, thanks." She grinned.

"Your bruise seems to have faded." Fishlegs added.

She touched her eye slightly. "Hiccup gave me a bit of balm to help it heal."

"So, what's the plan for today?" Asked Tuff.

"Yeah, we noticed the cliffs have some really cool caves." Ruff added.

"Can we explore them?" Tuff finished.

"How does that have anything to do with dragon training?" Hiccup chuckled.

It was then that Astrid noticed there was one person who was not participating in the discussion. Someone was very vocal about these types of things. In fact, he hadn't said anything since she sat down. That was very un-Snotlout. She glanced over to him to see he was eating casually, but he flicked his eyes up to hers. With a sneer, he looked pointedly in the other direction.

A pang hit her in the heart. Sure, Snotlout was a total pain in the butt, but he was a friend. While she could have gone without his flirting, she never imagined that this would be what got him to stop.

She rather he flirted with her.

"Astrid?" Hiccup nudged her.

"Huh? What?"

"We're going to do dragon training in the dark, sound fun?" Fishlegs explained.

She was thankful. Either they didn't know, or didn't care, any way, it felt like her life was still a bit normal. "Yeah." She grinned.

"My friends!" Stoick called over the hall.

And their goes my normalcy, she lamented.

"I have an announcement, for a momentous occasion! One that we've been waiting for, for a long time!" He waved the teens over.

"This is it." Hiccup sighed.

Shakily, she followed her soon-to-be husband to stand in front of the chief. The large man clapped a hand on both of their shoulders.

"It is with great pride that I announce the engagement of Astrid Hofferson to my son Hiccup!"

She tensed and prepared for the reaction.

Silence. Pure, unadulterated silence. She could hear _Hiccup _gulp. Then, slowly, murmuring took over the crowd.

"I know it must be a bit odd in light of certain events, but the ceremony will be taking place this Friggs day. Anyone who objects can come and talk to _me _about it."

Hiccup put a shaky hand on Astrid's back.

"Go sit down, quickly." Stoick urged in a whisper.

Hiccup heeded his words and carted Astrid back to the table. Sitting down, they caught the looks of their friends. Mostly shock, and a bit of outrage.

"Um, excuse me?" Ruff bit. "But were you planning on telling _us_ this?!"

"When did this even happen?" Fishlegs asked.

"Uhâ€¦yesterday?" Hiccup squeaked out.

"So, what, have you been a couple all this time?" Tuff asked.

"You didn't need to hide it from us, it was so obvious!" Ruff bemoaned. "I feel so betrayed!"

"N-no," Hiccup tried to amend. "I-We're not a couple. No, _weren't_ I should say. There wasâ€¦thisâ€¦thingâ€¦and well, it all just kinda happened so fast." He bumbled.

"Oh." Nodded Tuff. Then he smirked. "That's going to be one awkward marriage then, since Astrid doesn't love you back, huh Hiccup?"

Oh.

Ouch.

Hiccup opened his mouth to make some clever retort, but his lips trembled instead. His shoulders sunk.

"Don't say that out loud, idiot!" Ruffnut punched her brother.

"What! It's the truth!"

Astrid felt awful, because it was true, and Hiccup knew it. In a effort to raise his spirits, she grabbed his head and placed a rough kiss on his crown. "But I really like you." She whispered.

He simpered back to her, but said nothing. At that moment, it didn't matter. There was other stuff they had to worry about. In fact, she could hear the wave of conflict coming towards them.

The conversation around the room had switched to them, obviously. An engagement tended to do that.

Poor Astrid wished she was deaf.

"How could he do that to his son?" "Hiccup has such a bright future!" "The Hooligans are going downhill." "You don't think he's the one who did it?" "I see the way he looks at her, disgusting." "Stoick's lost his mind!" "If he's putting her in any position of power, I'm on the next boat out of here." "Me too." "We can't let this go through!" _

Astrid clapped her hands over her ears.

A new presence approached the table, and attention turned to them. "What a motley crew this is." He laughed.

Astrid made it very clear that she didn't want to talk to him. Thankfully, Snotlout was being as evasive as well.

"What do you want, Frag?"

"Still with that awful nickname, huh, Fishbone?"

"Would you rather he call you 'Nard?" Fishlegs asked, backing up his friend.

"This has nothing to do with you, Fat Ass, so you and your boobs can mind your own business."

Fishlegs only looked mildly offended. "Always with the boobsâ€¦"

"I'm going to ask you again," Hiccup said darkly. "What do you want?"

"Only to congratulate you, on yourâ€¦ success." He said, but his tone invoked malice. "Besides, I have an engagement present for the lady."

Hiccup merely raised an eyebrow as Fragonard placed a small box in front of her. It seemed harmless. Maybe a gift from Hamish in an attempt to apologize. But lifting the lid, she only caught a glance

of fleshy gray before she slammed it shut and shoved it away from her.

"You monster!" She howled.

"What the Hel is your problem!?" Hiccup shouted, jumping to his feet.

"I thought you wanted it!" Fragonard tried to defend himself.

"Why on midgard would we want that- that- vile thing!?"

"As proof!"

Tuff reached out for the box. "If it's gross enough to make Astrid scream, I want it."

"No- It's a body part!" Hiccup tried to warn.

"Cool, I can put it on the mantle next to my Uncle's clavicle." He, too, opened the box and then immediately closed it. "Nope. Don't want it."

Hiccup took the parcel back and secured a string around it.

"Hiccup?" Astrid asked, curious.

"I'm going to take this thing to the other side of the island. Then I'm going to burn it and send the ashes into the sea." Then he looked directly at Fragonard. "I want to completely destroy it."

The older teen flared his nostrils. "I didn't know you were so bold."

"Get used to it." He bit back.

With a loud huff, Fragonard glared back at the boy, his eyes filled with malice and hate. Hiccup fiercely met the gaze, and returned it.

"This isn't over." Fragonard snarled, but before letting Hiccup reply, he hurried from the hall, walking strangely.

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "What a creep."

"So what was that all about?" Fishlegs asked.

"Yeah, what's with the dick in a box?" Asked Tuff.

"Nothing." Said Hiccup. "He's just being a pervert."

Finally, after his prolonged silence, Snotlout spoke. "Fragonard raped Astrid." Then, he stood and walked off.

In that instance, Astrid wanted to bolt from the room, but Hiccup's hand on her shoulder kept her rigidly still.

"Whoa, back up!" Tuff called.

"Is he for real?" Ruffnut questioned, seeing her friend in turmoil.

The blonde dared not to look up, but couldn't find the words to answer. She tilted her head to the side just a tad in request for Hiccup to answer for her.

"Yes. It's true."

"Oh." Fishlegs responded.

Tears began to leak from her lids as she heard the scrapping of chairs. She peered up to see everyone standing, plates and cups in their hands. Her teeth grit and she was met with silence.

"Don't go!" She whispered. She reached out and grabbed Ruffnut's arm. "Please Ruff!"

The blonde twin pouted, looking guilty. "I'm sorry, Astrid!" She turned away.

Her last supports had abandoned her. Now, it was just the man at her side.

"Let's go, Astrid." Hiccup whispered.

"Where?" She moaned. "Where could we possibly go?"

"Away."

"

A cliff side. High above the village, out of the way of man except by dragon. The sky was gray, the air cold, like the hearts of those below. Astrid stood despondently nearby and watched Hiccup build a fire. Her hair swirled around her like a whip, giving her a wild look. Both were silent as Hiccup put the tool of sin on the flames. It burned quickly, spewing black smoke and foul smell into the air. Then, it was all reduced to ash.

Hiccup gathered the remains into a cloth sack, along with a rock for weight.

"Would you like to do the honors?" He held it out to her.

Astrid took it limply, shifting the weight in her hands. Realization of what she was holding came to her. This wasn't what she hated, this wasn't what needed to be destroyed, and this wasn't what ruined her.

But it was a start.

With a thundering shout, Astrid gripped the bag and hurled it over the edge. Toothless watched it go and set it alight with a plasma blast before it hit the sea.

"There, that was oddly satisfying." Hiccup announced, his hands on his hips.

Astrid ripped another stone from the ground and threw it into the sea, with the same vehement scream. Rain began to drip from above, dampening the couple. Again and again, she pitched rocks, throwing her anger out and away as hard as she could.

"I don't need you! I never did! I can take care of myself! Spineless, narrow-minded cowards! Good riddance!" she screamed.

When she had no more ammunition, she fell to the ground and buried her miserable face in the grass.

"Astrid..." Hiccup kneeled at her side, but did not touch her.

"It's not fair!" She screamed. Her body raked with sobs. She was silent for a long many moments, before she whispered in a small trembling voice, "Tell me where I went wrong. Everyone I ever loved has left me. I'd do everything differently, if I could go back in time. There's nothing I can say to change the things I've done." She sniffed heavily. "Of all the things I hid from you, I can't hide the shame I feel. And I pray someone...something will come to take away the pain." She turned her head to the side, and looked up to him with one eye. "There's no way out of this dark place. I have no hope, no future. I know I can't be free...But I can't see any other way. I can'tâ€¦" She squeezed her eyes shut. "I just want to fly away."

Hiccup placed a firm hand on her shoulder. "You lead, and Toothless and I will follow."

With trembling lips, she uttered, "With my own wingsâ€¦"

His hold tightened. "The fearless Astrid Hofferson doesn't give up for anything. Not on herself, not on me."

She sat up, rubbing the dirt and dust from her eyes. "I can't understand you, Hiccup."

"Do I need to speak louder?"

She smirked. "No." Then she turned serious. "Youâ€¦you could have any girl in the world. Really, you could."

"But-â€¦"

"If love had nothing to do with it?"

He was quiet. If he didn't love Astridâ€¦well, that was something he simply couldn't imagine.

"I am dirt now, Hiccup. Regardless of highly you think of me. Why would you trade silver forâ€¦some unpolished metal?" She asked, metaphorically.

He shrugged. "I'm a blacksmith. Unpolished metal suits me better."

Astrid threw her arms around him in an uncharacteristic embrace, one that was tight and sure, nearly knocking him over. "When you say things like that, you remind me of how great you are."

He wanted to correct her. To tell her that, in fact, he wasn't great, he was average. He just excelled where others failed, and failed where others excelled. But, he didn't want to tell her she was wrong, so he simply returned her hold and spoke into her ear, "Thank you, Astrid."

He felt her dig her fingers into his back muscles as she clung to him for dear life. "When will this all stop?"

He combed her hair with his fingers. "It won't last forever."

"But I wish it could all just be over withâ€¦"

He pulled away to look her in the face. "Try not to think about it." He parted the bangs from her face. "Do you want me to sing to you again?"

She shook her head. "Can _I_ sing for _you_?"

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "You have a song?"

"Maybe I dreamt it. Maybeâ€¦maybe someone sang it to me."

"Who?"

She shrugged, "I have no idea." She grinned. "I just thought it was weird that I had a song, out of nowhere. Itâ€¦it doesn't really make any sense."

"Did mine? It was all about flowers." He smiled at her. "I'm sure it will be great."

Astrid's voice had a lightness to it, compared with the darkness in her words.

"_Sadly, one Sun's day, I waited and waited with flowers in my arms for the dream I'd created. I waited 'til dreams, like my heart, were all broken. The flowers were all dead and the words were unspoken. The grief that I knew was beyond all consoling. The beat of my heart was a bell that was tolling._

"Saddest of Sun's days."

Hiccup decided he didn't like this song. He loved her voice, but the words were too painfully true.

"_Then came a Sun's day when you came to find me. They bore me to hall and I left you behind me. My eyes could not see one I wanted to love me. The earth and the flowers are forever above me. The bell tolled for me and the wind whispered, "Never!"_

"But for you I have cared and I bless you forever...

"Last of all Sun's days."

She finished with finality, her cottony voice disappearing. Then she spoke, not willing to look at his face. "Silly, right?"

"No." He frowned. His fingers caressed her forehead. "Can I kiss

you? "

She met his earnest eyes.

"On the forehead." He clarified.

Her shy smile was his answer. He delicately placed a kiss on her soft skin, lingering for just a moment. Then he rested his own against hers, and kept her close by a gentle hand on her cheek.

"Astrid, if you give up now, you'll never get the chance to see things get better. You'll miss out on beauty, and so many wonderful things."

"You're the only one around here that wants me." She glanced to his hand holding hers.

"Untrue." He frowned. "Toothless and Stormflyâ€"â€|"

"Are dragons, and don't understand."

"I was going to say, they are just the beginning. My father, Gobber, and your parents, whether you acknowledge it or not. I'm sure there are others that we don't know about." He tilted her chin just a bit so she would look at him. "No one wants you dead, Astrid."

She offered the tiniest of smirks. "Except maybe Fragonard."

He regarded her. "You might be right about that."

Her eyes shifted downward, a look of uncertainty fluttering across her face.

"There's something else." He acknowledged. "What is it?"

She sighed with a shaky breath. "Hiccup&|if I am&|pregnant&|and heaven forbid that I am&|there's&" there's something I need to know."

"Yeah?"

"Could youâ€"...? Would youâ€"â€"?" She sighed yet again and pulled away from him. How could she ask this of him? She didn't have the right. It wouldn't be fair to pressure him with a question like that.

"Could I what?" He urged, willing to answer.

She didn't look at him. "Could you love the baby?"

Talk about a loaded question.

Before he could answer, she was rambling. "I understand if it's a no, and that's what I expected! I mean, I don't even know if I could love it! Knowing where it came from! I justâ€"â€"is that wrong? I can't imagineâ€"

A finger came and pressed against her lips. "If it does happen, rest assured, I will love our child."

"But, he's not yoursâ€|"

"He will be mine." He nodded. "I will love him as my own, as I love you."

She ducked her head. "You need to stop this."

"Stop what?" He asked, panicked.

"Stop making me so emotional!" Still, she smiled at him. "Why do you have to be so nice and kind all the time?"

He smirked and shrugged, scratching his chin. "I guessâ€|I don't want anyone to suffer the pain of loneliness I went through. The feeling that no one is there for youâ€|it's hard. And I want to make it as easy as possible. Does that sound corny?"

She cupped his jaw. "Not at all." Then she placed a kiss on his cheek.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a bright idea came over the young man and he took her arms in excitement. "Let's go to GoÃ°i's!"

"What?" The blonde was shaken by his sudden proposal. "Why?"

"Look, she might be able to help. She'll be able to tell what's wrong. And maybe it would help your peace of mind to find out ifâ€|or what damage was done."

She scrunched up her nose. "I don't know if I want to knowâ€|"

"We'll find out eventually." He offered. "Why not now?"

"Okay." She amended.

He then stood, offering out his hand. She took it with grace and together they flew on Toothless over the village to the old woman's house.

The black dragon touched down on GoÃ°i's porch, his claws scraping against the wood. Hiccup helped her off and began to approach the door to knock, when Astrid grabbed his arm.

"It won't change anythingâ€|right?"

He tugged her closer and put his arm around her shoulders. "Of course not."

"But you need an heirâ€"â€|"

"Astrid," he stopped her patiently. "Let's worry about that later."

Before anything else was said, GoÃ°i came outside and spotted them. Of course, she knew what happened already and gestured for Astrid to come inside. Hiccup started to follow, but the old woman held a firm hand to his chest, forbidding entry.

He blushed, realizing the mistake he had almost made, then he nodded

and took a seat on the porch. The door closed softly, and Toothless joined his companion, shading him from the light drizzle.

There was silence for an extended period of time. He wasn't sure what the woman was doing, but he felt nervous for Astrid.

Then, Astrid's voice spoke, with nervousness ringing within it. "Iâ€|I was coming out of the woods, after training, and I passed by the armoryâ€|"

It was the story of the incident. She was relaying it to the old woman. He had heard it before, when Astrid told him herself, but this time, she was more detailed. GoÃ°i needed to know what happened, exactly. Maybe it was easier to tell the old mute woman than him, but she disclosed finite information as to what transpired in that barn.

Hiccup cried. His hand clamped fiercely over his trembling lips to mute himself. He wasn't supposed to hear, and he didn't want to hear. Butâ€|he knew that it was a good thing, it would help her heal, and help him to know what to stay away from. Still, his throat constricted painfully and his body withdrew into himself. He felt defiled, he felt dirty, he felt her rage of absolute devastation.

Toothless whined low and nudged his friend. Hiccup smiled down at him, to ensure him he was okay.

The door opened. GoÃ°i stood, looking calm as ever, and beckoned him in. Astrid sat in a chair, her legs crossed and a cup of tea in her hands. He sat next to her, and the old woman handed him one as well. He eyeballed it critically.

"Is this normal tea?"

Astrid giggled. "Yours is. I have moon tea."

Hiccup graced her with a smile once he saw her salvaged attitude. The woman must have delivered some good news.

"GoÃ°i said I'm going to be okay. Everything will heal just fine. There's nothing to expect in the coming months." She smiled.

His own smile was sordid. It was one thing to destroy her innocence, but to physically inflict wounds, that was even worse. He should have anticipated it, he had seen the scars after all.

"I'll be able to give you an heir someday, Hiccup." Her eyes watered, this was the thing she was most concerned about?

"That's good." He leaned closer. "You know, your worth doesn't come from your baby making abilities."

She nodded, a smile still on her face. "I want to be useful to you. I have to pay back all the kindness you've given me."

He didn't argue. "If you must." He huffed.

The old woman took a seat across from both of them, and rested her staff against the wall. She sat attentive, her hands on her knees.

Catching the couple off guard, she opened her mouthâ€¦

And spoke.

GoÃ°i was the oldest and most respected in the clan. Being the oldest, that meant that things from her past could die with those that knew.

GoÃ°i told Astrid that she had been lucky. Things could have been worse.

She calmly spoke of her childhood, being raised by her single father that would beckon her to his bed every night. She suffered much abuse at his hand. How she longed to tell, but her parent was stern and threatening. Her words turned to ash. Her voice ceased, as her begging turned into silence. She would make it out, her father becoming prey to the dragons. She married a man who loved her, despite the tragedy that befell her, but she would never have children. Her husband died too soon, as the result of a raid. And she was left alone and silent. Finally, she told the chief, Stoick's father, scratching the message into the floor. He moved her up to mountain, to sequester her, and in her isolation, she learned. Years passed and she stayed silent about her past. Soon, everyone she knew and looked up to went to Valhalla while she remained. Now, she was one of the most powerful and influential people in the village.

Astrid broke down into tears, and enraptured the woman in a hug. It was not something to be happy about, but now that she was not the only who went through it made it easier. And everyone loved GoÃ°i.

Maybe, everything _would _be okay.

7. Confrontation

The duo stay up in the cliff side house for the rest of the afternoon. The teens had always respected GoÃ°i, but now, there was a connection that made her seem more human. Finally, dinner time rolled around, and the healer demanded that they go back.

"You need to face them." She said. "Avoidance will not help."

And she was right, of course. Still, the Great Hall seemed so cold despite the warm atmosphere. The two walked passed tables, the occupants defiantly avoiding them. They sat by Stoick and Gobber, who were alone at the table.

"And where have you two been all afta-noon?"

"We went to GoÃ°i's." Hiccup replied.

"Ah!" Stoick snapped. "Great idea! And?"

"Everything will be fine." Astrid answered, sincerely.

"Wonderful!" He cheered.

"So you missed et, ladâ€¦" Gobber started. He was off telling Hiccup

a story of something in the forge. Once he started mentioning tools and equipment, Astrid's mind began to wonder away. She snagged onto a conversation from another table, unfortunately. It was a bad habit and she needed to stop.

"_So, you think he did it?" _

"Why else is Stoick being all calm about it?"

"Tis a shame, the boy had such a bright future."

"What a pig!"

"That girl has always been such a problem. I never liked her. I betcha, she started it."

"Boys will be boys, after all."

"I bet the only reason Stoick is keeping her around is because of her skills with fighting and the dragons. Odin knows we can't afford to lose warriors."

"I bet the kid planned it. He wanted her."

"But why? He's the chief son, I know they're close."

"Who knows what goes on in that kid's brain. He's a lunatic"

Astrid had it. She pounded her fist on the table. "ENOUGH!" She cried.

The room came to attention as she stood on the table. Her three table mates looked terrified. "Listen up you spineless urchins! You disgust me! What has happened to you? I didn't think our village would resort to gossip! You should be ashamed! You want to know the truth? Fine. You can blame everything on me. I don't care. You can slander my name, you could brand me with scandal and disgrace. But, you will notâ€” you can _not _talk about my Hiccup that way. He has done nothing but what is right and he deserves your respect! He saved Berk, he deserves enough respect for that alone for a lifetime! Why do you have to be so hateful!? Why can't you all just mind your own damned business!?" With that, she bolted from the room.

The blonde sat heavily on the steps. Ashamed, she kept a fist to her forehead. Her emotions had taken over, and she caused more embarrassment to herself and Hiccup. That wasn't fair to the boy.

She should have ignored it.

But she didn't.

It was raining harder now, and behind the clouds, the sun was setting. Another day had passed. Tomorrow, at this same time, she would be married. It was a strange enough thought, but she was still trying to sort out her feelings for the freckled boy.

"I'm such a mess." She bemoaned.

"I'll give you that much." Hiccup answered, standing behind her.
"But, you have a pretty good excuse."

"I'm sorryâ€¦" She sighed.

In a few steps, he was in front of her, kneeling to meet her eyes.
"I'm not mad." He grinned. "Thank you, for standing up for me."

"About time I did."

He grimaced and pushed her hair from her face. "I mean it, Astrid. I've put up with it for years. I'm used to it. You didn't have to stand up for meâ€¦but thank you. Really."

She smirked up at him.

His smile grew. "Soâ€¦_my _Hiccup?"

Her face turned sour as she punched his shoulder. "I'll be marrying you tomorrow, so I basically own your sorry ass."

He chuckled and then dropped down on the step to sit, facing away from her. "I guess that is true."

Idly, Astrid took some of the boy's maroon locks and began to braid them. "So, I guess I made things worse."

"Nah. Justâ€¦umâ€¦it'll last longer?"

"I wish there was something I could do!" She whined, tugging on the plait.

"Maybeâ€¦" He paused. "Maybe you could regain your honor."

"How?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "There might be someday."

"Wouldn't marrying you do that?"

"Yeahâ€¦but, I feel like that's not enough."

"Like I need to prove myself?"

"Maybe. You know what? Nevermind, I don't know what I'm talking about." He wiped his bangs away from his face. He was now soaked, sitting out in the rain.

"No, no." She stopped him. "I think you're on to somethingâ€¦"

"Well, let's think about it inside, we'll get sick if we stay wet out here." He shivered.

"I'm not going back in there." She was adamant.

"Okay, then let's go to the forge. Get warmed up while we're at it."

She slipped her hand into his and they hurried along.

"Hey Astrid, I know that since our wedding is tomorrow, we can't do a lot of the traditional stuff. And that's cool with me—I'm not a traditional guy—but I'd like to at least make you a ring."

She looked up at him. "You would?"

"Yeah, I mean—it's still marriage. Even if we aren't prepared." At this point, they had reached the glowing shack and the duo removed their soaked outer wear. Hiccup slipped into the back room and grabbed a blanket. "Here." He tossed it to Astrid.

She wrapped up in it gratefully.

"Do you mind if I remove my shirt?" He asked the blonde. "I'm soaked through."

She smirked. "Go ahead."

He grasped the hem but then looked back at her. "This is going to sound silly, but please hear me out."

"Okay."

"I'm—I'm really self conscience about my body." He licked his lips. "I wear a lot of furs and long fitting tunics to cover it—but I—" He sighed and slowly removed the wet fabric. He threw the wet shirt over a rack hanging by the fire to dry. He never finished his sentence as he went around and collected different tools he would need to make the ring. As he moved, her eyes never left him.

Astrid knew the boy was skinny. It was a fact of life. But she didn't expect the muscle that was hiding. It wasn't viking-like muscle, the beefy arms and budding chest of a man that lugged weight around for the fun of it. But the brawn of one that used his body with purpose. His shoulders were wider than she had noticed, the mountainous flesh peaking at his neck, his clavicle was broad and left a divot in his shoulders. His arms were long, but defined with ridges that danced when he flexed. The veins in his arms and hands spread like spiderwebs, as she was reminded of the kindness and compassion that flowed through them. His ribs were visible, as she knew they would be, since she could feel the individual bones when she hugged him. But his chest had a pleasant cushion to it, as it rose and fell with each nervous breath he took. His abdomen was tight and artistically chiseled, obviously being worked from riding. A trail of fine hair led from his naval to past his belt.

He turned his back to her, bringing up the fires in the forge. With each pump of the bellows, his shoulder blade cut with swiftness, resembling the wings of his beloved Nightfury. Astrid's eyes raked over his pale, sun-deprived skin, littered with freckles and dozens of scars, and she realized that he had aged. It should have kicked in when he stood taller than her, but now—he was no longer the awkward boy of fifteen, who was asking her to trust him and climb on the back of a dragon. This new, older Hiccup, was preparing to make her wedding ring—

And still, he was asking for her to trust him.

Hiccup turned back around and caught her staring at him intently. Immediately, he blushed. "I tell you that I'm embarrassed, and you're studying me."

Astrid grinned at the sight of his blush creeping down his body. "I don't see why you're embarrassed." She shrugged.

His eyes widened. "Do you need to get your eyes checked? Look at me!" He put his hands on his chest. "I'm skinny!"

"Oh, I am looking at you!" She snorted, "So? Would you rather be fat?"

"Well, yeah." He shrugged. "Maybe not like Fishleg's size, but I would like some fat! No matter how much I eat, I'm just skin and bone!" He sighed. "I know this must be hard for you to understand. You have a perfect figure, and with what happened!" He stopped.

"Hiccup, you really have nothing to be ashamed of. You look good."

"I don't need you to reassure me. I just took off my shirt because I was soaked. You don't need to say all that."

She stood and draped the blanket on the counter. "But I mean it! You look fine! I mean, mighty fine." She bit her lip.

His eyebrows furrowed. "Whoa, wait, what? Are you saying I'm attractive?"

"Maybe not tall, dark, and handsome, but easy on the eyes, for sure." She stepped closer.

He scoffed. "You're just saying that."

"Why would I lie about it?" And being daringly bold, she reached out a hand and rested it on his chest.

He drew back. "Cold! Cold hands!"

"Oh, come on Hiccup." She teased, grasping his waist and pulling him closer. "I just want to show you what a big boy you are."

He flushed more, and Astrid grinned. She got a certain sort of satisfaction watching him fluster, and even though it was mean, she pursued it. "You're such a man." Her hand slid over his abs and up to his chest.

Hiccup gulped heavily as the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. What in Thor's name was she doing? "Astrid, I-I'd really appreciate it if you removed your hands."

She stepped closer and kept one hand on his back while the other groped at his chest. "Just savor the moment!" She whispered, her breath skirted across his throat.

Was it hot in the forge? Maybe. He couldn't tell under the blood rush. His eyes fluttered closed as he whimpered at her touch.

"As-Astr-Asssttrâ€|" He couldn't form her name. His hands clamped into fists. "Stopâ€|Stop please."

She cupped his rib cage as one thumb rubbed circles on his skin, her other hand trailed up his spine, her finger nails trailing softly. "A little longer."

Her ministrations were doing bad things to him and he worried for his sanity. This had to stop or else he might do something stupid, like grab her and kiss her. He was trying to be a gentlemen, especially with what happened.

He forced his eyes open and looked at her. He wanted to be firm, but his voice was a whisper. A desperate plea. "Astrid, please stop."

Like she had been slapped, the blonde recoiled from her friend and held her hands to her chest. Her breaths were staggering as tears pricked her eyes. "Hiccup, I'm soâ€" I'm so sorry!" She moaned. "Oh, I'm such an idiot! I can't believe!" She covered her face with her hands. "I'm just like himâ€|I'm dirty just like himâ€|" She whispered. Then she looked up at Hiccup, who held a face of shock and confusion. "I didn't mean to force you into thatâ€|I don't ever want to do anything without your permissionâ€|you told me to stop and I didn'tâ€|I'm justâ€"â€|" Her eyes squeezed shut. "I'm just like Fragonard!"

"WHOA!" Hiccup shouted, jolting her from her self-loathing. "Far from it, milady!" He tried to smile to put her at ease. "It's not like I didn't want it. I justâ€|hmm." How to say it without making an absolute fool out of himself. "Well, I didn't want to...be tempted."

Astrid peered up at him. "What?"

"The touching wasâ€|hmmâ€|well, it wasâ€|nice, but you knowâ€|"

She was tentative. "Arousing?"

"Yeah, that's the word." He pursed his lips. "And I didn't think it was appropriate."

"Oh." Was her soft reply.

They stood silently for a few awkward moments, but occasionally snuck glances at the other. Finally, Hiccup sighed in defeat. "You know what? If you like it, and it makes you happy, then go ahead. I'll bare with it." He took her hands and placed them on his chest. "Go ahead."

She smirked as she patted his skin. "I did it to get a rise out of you. It's not fun if you don't care."

"Wait, what?"

"You're cute when you're embarrassed." She grinned.

Despite his best efforts, he flushed crimson. "I am not cute. I'm manly as Thor." He flexed.

She cackled. "You're _adorable_!"

He groaned. "Fine, have it your way. But if you're going to humiliate me, justâ€¦try to keep your hands off of me. At least until we're married."

She smirked brighter. "Whatever you say, _lover boy."_

At this point, his entire torso was red. He muttered obscenities under his breath.

As the fires were growing, he took out a paper and a ribbon. Hiccup cleared his throat. "Alright, let's get to work. First, I need to size your finger."

She agreed, holding out her hand for him to inspect.

He rested her palm across his fingertips. "Woop, this won't do." And he curled his fingers around hers. "Your hand is cold."

She rolled her eyes. "Real smooth, Hiccup."

"No, I'm serious! Your fingers need to be room temperature when I measure."

She shrugged, allowing him to rub her digits and breathe warmth back into them. Unknowingly, they came closer together, almost touching foreheads. He wrapped the ribbon around and marked where it overlapped. "There we are." He smiled, and then looked up.

Their eyes met and Hiccup felt his heart clench. Her eyes were always so beautiful, and in this night, he could see the glowing fires of the forge reflecting in them. What was wrong with him today?

"Uhâ€¦" He started.

"Do it." She commanded.

"What?"

"Whatever you're thinking, I dare you to do it. Right now."

He blinked once. And then blinked again. "I'm not thinking anything."

"I can see it, you're thinking _something." _She insisted.

"I was thinking about your pretty eyes, but that's it!"

"You weren't going to kiss me?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Do you want to?"

"Do you want me to want to?"

"Stop it! Are you going to kiss me or what?!" She barked.

He stared at her. "Are you sure?"

She sighed, and tugged his hand so he came closer. "Iâ€|We'll have to kiss tomorrow, in front of people. Andâ€|I guessâ€|I've missed it." She swallowed hard. "Just a little one, to prepare me for later."

"Positive?"

"Yes." She nodded.

It was merely a peck. It didn't even last a second. But it made Astrid shiver in a delightful way. She smiled at his shyness, blushed at his kindness, and reveled in his tenderness. If Fragonard had an exact opposite, that's what Hiccup would be. "Thank you." She said softly.

"No, thank you." He scrunched his nose at her, grinning toothily and still redder than wine.

His smile was contagious.

A moment later, a large black dragon sauntered into the forge, shaking the rain from his back.

"Well, well, and where have you been, young sir?" Hiccup asked, his hands on his hips. His elated mood was evident in his voice.

Toothless gave a dragon-like shrug and shouldered passed him, curling up by the fire.

Hiccup shook his head in good humor and took a seat at the bench, drawing up a simple ring design on the paper. "So," he began, "I was thinking of a cloisonnÃ© ring, using some of Stormfly's scales?"

Astrid grinned. "Depends, what's cloisonnÃ©?"

"It's a way to decorate metal. I would inlay the scales into the gold or silver to create colorful designsâ€|likeâ€|" He thought of an analogy. "Like a brick wall with mortar."

"Oh, I seeâ€|" She nodded slowly.

"Would you like that?"

"Sure!" She wrapped the blanket tighter and moved towards him. She rested her head on his shoulder and watched him.

He carefully sketched a simple design onto the paper. Something that would make her ring unique.

He felt her yawn. "You know, I can walk you back home." He offered.

She shook her head and pulled away. "Nah, I'll just wait here until you're done for the night." And she curled up on top of Toothless. "Wake me up when you're done."

He regarded her, shrugged and continued working.

He was planning on working the whole night through. His nightmares had kept him up, and he planned on pushing them away by burning the midnight oil. He glanced over to Astrid, who slept peacefully upon his best friend. Toothless wouldn't stay there all night, and she would regret sleeping like that for long. He finished his sketch and approached the girl.

"Astrid?" He whispered.

She hummed in reply.

Hiccup sighed as he didn't have the heart to wake her. Instead, he reached around her and pulled her up into his arms. He wobbled a bit, still not very strong, but he held firm.

"Toothless, pst!" He nudged his dragon with his foot. Why was it easier to wake up a two ton dragon than a fragile girl?

The world may never know.

Toothless stood up and stretched. "Come on, bud. Let's go home."

The dragon whined in the prospect of going out in the rain, but then perked up in joy of his slate. He held out his wing to shield the couple from the down pour and out they went.

As stated earlier, Hiccup was not very strong. But he could hold his own, and he was getting better. He was lucky that Astrid was light as his leg only slipped a few times, never actually taking him down.

He arrived at his home to see that his father was still gone. He creaked upstairs and gently rested Astrid in his bed. She instantly curled around his pillow and breathed a deep sigh. He rid her of her muddy boots before tucking her in.

"Sleep tight." He cupped her cheek. Then he turned to his faithful companion who was making himself comfortable. "I'm going to keep working. Stay with Astrid, okay?"

The dragon had no argument as he rested his head on his paws.

Astrid waited until she heard the click of his prosthetic going down the stairs before she opened her eyes. A great smile came over her face that she hid the whole time he carried her. He was so smitten. But, she considered it far from weak, but really adorable. He was much too kind and sweet for his own good.

Astrid pulled his pillow closer, soaking in his scent. Maybe, just maybe

She was smitten too.

Hiccup arrived back at the forge, not much more wet then he had been. It was time to get down to business. First, he would melt down the metal needed for the filigree, then he would go retrieve the scattered scales from Stormfly's old shelter. Gobber kept a chest of raw gold up in the attic for filigree purposes. So the boy pulled down the ladder and climbed up. It took some hunting, but he found a nice sized piece for the base and another for the crevasses. He

climbed back down and set the raw ore on the table.

He glanced up and suddenly jumped in surprise as Fragonard stood menacingly nearby, his brothers behind him.

"What do you want?" Hiccup asked, calm but irked.

Fragonard didn't answer.

"You have no business here." The teen urged. "Please leave."

"Or what?"

"We're in a forge full of weapons. Do you really need me to spell it out?" He really hoped Fragonard would just take the hint. It was likely the older teen was more proficient in weapons than Hiccup, but he masked his panic.

"I told you this wasn't over. I just needed to get that stupid dragon away from you." He took up an all metal shovel that was hanging from the wall.

For the slightest moment, Hiccup was thankful that he grabbed a dull weapon, and not a blade. Though, he cursed internally for leaving Toothless and Stormfly behind. "Guaranteed, Toothless has a higher IQ than you do." He backed away carefully.

"I would be begging for forgiveness, if I were you." The older boy smacked the flat of the shovel against his hand.

"You obviously know nothing about me." A handle caught Hiccup's eye as he reached back and grabbed the weapon that rested in the fires. "I don't beg, and I don't cave under threats." He swung his arm forward, brandishing the weapon with a loud swooping sound. The bright orange metal sizzled as he pointed the sword at his opponent. "Get. Out." He bit.

Fragonard laughed. "You think that scares me? You don't have the guts."

It didn't matter that the blade was dull, Hiccup stepped forward and pressed the scalding tip into the boy's arm.

Fragonard recoiled, foaming at the mouth. "You son of a—" He shrieked and swung the shovel at his face. Hiccup parried the attack, sending sparks off the metal.

"If you leave now, I won't tell your dad, and I may leave your other limbs intact." Hiccup warned.

"You're so full of yourself!" He flourished the metal once again, only to be blocked. "You ruined my life! You're going to pay!"

"You had it coming! You ruined Astrid's life!" Hiccup pushed the tool away and attacked.

"I don't know why you care about that whore!"

"You wouldn't! You heartless bastard!" And he aimed to stab Frag in the shoulder, but was met with air.

He just made a critical mistake. He left himself wide open. Fragonard sent a swift kick between his legs, making him curl into himself before he careened the shovel into the side of his face.

Hiccup crumbled on the ground, holding his throbbing head and ringing ears. Frag stepped on his wrist and disarmed him. Hiccup winced at the cleated boot.

"Stupid little shit." He kicked him in the stomach. "You're going to pay. I'll make your death long and miserable."

"You can't...death is an instantaneous thingâ€|" He breathed. Sometimes his sarcasm was a curse.

"You're going to wish you never opened your mouth." And he slammed a kick into the side of his head. Hiccup saw spots, his head full of cotton.

"If you apologize, I'll make it quick."

Hiccup spat out blood as he fought to sit up. His hands trembled as he reached to brace himself on the table. "I'm sorryâ€|" He whispered. Then he looked at him. "Sorry you're such an ass."

It was like facing a dragon for the first time all over again. The night he knocked Toothless out of the sky and he was chased by the Nightmare around the village. Only this time, he couldn't run. He was outsized and out numbered. He was weak and defenseless. For once in a few years, he felt true fear for his life when he looked his attacker in the face.

"So, what's it going to be?" He muttered.

Like a snake, a great hand coiled around his neck and prevented him from breathing. As Hiccup choked, he flailed his arms and legs in vain trying to break free. Fragonard landed three heavy punches to his face.

"Get his legs." Frag commanded his brothers. "Let's go."

Before he faced his doom, he hoped that Astrid would at least stay safe.

* * *

><p>Because all of you guys love my plot twists. :)<p>

8. Condemned

Fun fact time! Fragonard's name was originally 'Thagur' but I decided that sounded too much like Dagur, so I changed it. His name comes from a famous French Rococo Artist, Jean-HonorÃ© Fragonard, who is famous for the painting 'The Swing,' which makes a cameo in Frozen.

Kyleeadams123- I get your reviews, and I want to say thank you! Now, you just need to make an account so I can answer your questions!

BTW, you can find me on Tumblr by the same name!

Please read the Author's note at the bottom!

* * *

><p>For the first time since the incident, Astrid arose with the sun. She heard Toothless' soft crooning and turned to the bed next to her, prepared to see her best friend tucked in bed.<p>

His absence perturbed her.

"I bet he fell asleep at the forge." She rolled her eyes. She got up and stretched, then looked closer at her bed. It was still made, so he really never came home last night. With a shrug, she began to get dressed.

Toothless heard her get up and followed, in prospect of food.

Downstairs she went, only to hear Stoick still snoring away. She snuck out the front door, beginning her man hunt.

It started at the forge, where she expected him to be, but when he was no where in sight, her concern rose. "Hiccup?" She asked. She pulled back the curtain to his back room, and found it empty.

"This is so oddâ€¦!" She whispered to herself. Her eyes scanned the room, looking for any sort of clue to his whereabouts.

A gleam caught her eye. A gold piece sat on the table, out in the open. Why would Hiccup do something so negligent as to leave a piece a gold out? Then again, why was it still in a raw state? Shouldn't it be melted down by now? He was supposed to be working all night. Next to the ore was the concept drawing, fully sketched.

Where was Hiccup?

"Good morning, lass!" A goat like voice chirped. "I thought you'd be preparing for your wedding!"

Astrid glanced over to Gobber and acknowledged him. "I thought I would be too, but my husband to be is missing, I'm afraid."

"Really? You 'aven't seen im?"

"No, have you?"

"No, not since last night when you made your proclamation."

Oh, that's right. She told everyone off. Well, she would worry about that later, right now, she had to find Hiccup.

"What's this doing here?" Gobber muttered as he picked up a sword lying on the ground. "I've been fixing this for Shamus, but now it's all dented."

Possessing the keen eye of a fighter, Astrid's gaze fell to the ground. Hints of blood littered the dirt and the edge of a table. Her

eyes widened.

"I'm going to look elsewhere," she spoke, her eyes riveted on the mess. "Tell me if you see him."

"Will do lass!" And he went to work, blissfully unaware of her discovery.

She took Stormfly to the cove, assuming that would be the next place he would be. She called for him, but there was no answer. It was the same result on the beach and at the arena. Desperate, she went back home.

"Good morning, Astrid." Stoick greeted.

She didn't miss a beat. "I can't find Hiccup."

"Did you check theâ€"â€"|"

"I checked the forge, the cove, the beach, and the arena. Gobber hasn't seen him either."

"Well, I bet he's around here somewhere. Toothless is here, so he couldn't have flown off. I bet it's just some pre-wedding jitters."

"I have a very bad feeling that it's not."

Stoick sighed. "Everything's fine, Astrid. Did you check the Great Hall?"

She opened her mouth and then snapped it shut. She hadn't. without another word, she turned and left.

The Great Hall was at it's normal occupancy, people congregating for breakfast and the like. When she entered, glances were made her way, but no one said anything to her. There were a few smiles, as a result of her sticking up for herself yesterday, but that was about it.

Women of the village were hanging garland from the rafters and converting the room for a wedding. She sighed.

She spotted Fragonard and his brothers merrily chatting and scarfing down breakfast. They were in too good of a mood for her comfort.

A quiet table of four teens was the next thing to grab her attention, and she hurried back to them.

"Have any of you guys seen Hiccup?" She asked, without so much as a greeting.

No one replied, as guilty looks crossed their faces.

"Look," She snapped, irate. "I know I'm 'unclean' or whatever, according to the law. I'm sure you're parents told you to stay away from me. But didn't they also tell you to stay away from dragons? Because according to the law, they were evil? I thought we were pioneers."

The teens shared glances with each other.

"This isn't about me right now, I'm really concerned for Hiccup."

"Why?" Asked Tuffnut.

"Because I can't find him anywhere and no one has seen him. Toothless is back at the house, where he's been all night, and Fragonard is in a frightening good mood."

"Well, if Toothless is here, he has to still be on Berk." Fishlegs offered.

"That's what Stoick suggested. Could you guys help me look?"

Not but a handful of moments later, the teens were spread out over the island. Astrid rode on Toothless's back, deciding and admitting that Hiccup's dragon was faster and a better tracker than her Nadder. Not able to work the rodder, the two raced through the woods on land.

_Climbing rose on the wall, pick it now, before the petals fall.
Apple ripe on the bough, take it, for the time to take is
now._

"Toothless, let me down." She coaxed the dragon to a halt. "Let's spread out and cover more ground. You take the north, I'll take the south."

Toothless snorted and darted into the trees.

_So my love, oh, my love. We'll watch the showers, that kiss the
flowers. Perhaps we'll do the same. And I am hopin', your heart will
open, like roses in the rain_.

"Hiccup!" She called, her voice echoing emptily through the trees. This was bad. There was no sign of the boy. Then again, he might not even be on the island. He could be out on a boat—well, Snotlout was checking the water. Maybe Hiccup had gone fishing for Toothless and fell asleep.

That was optimism, for sure. Snotlout would have found him by now if that was the case. On the other hand, if Fragonard was behind his disappearance, it could be a whole other thing. Would they even find Hiccup? Could Frag be so demented that he threw Hiccup into the sea, from a cliff? That was horrific and gruesome to think about, and probably a worst case scenario. "Hiccup!" She called again. Still no answer, and she pressed on.

_Nothing is forever, always is a lie. I can only love you till the
day I die._

If anything happens to him, she knows she'll blame herself. He got involved because of her after all. If he had just acted like everyone else and stayed out of it, he might be playing with Toothless or something right now.

But then, _she_ might not even be here.

Hiccup was a grown boy. He could take care of himself. He carried her home last night, in fact. But without Toothless, she feared he was defenseless. And maybe, he sort of was. She called out for him again.

Before the rain goes, we'll look for rainbows. That bloom in lovers lane, till sunlight settles, upon the petals... _

Of roses in the rain

There. A soft scratching sound hit her ears. She listened closely, trying to discern the direction. It was something big. Too big for a woodland animal, but too small for a dragon. Rocks rolled across the ground, down a slope.

"Hiccup?" Astrid cried.

A loud thumping sound came from just over the ridge, and she hurried to find it.

Her heart fluttered in her chest like a caged bird, as her blood ran cold.

Hiccup lay on the ground, mostly naked, and mutilated. He cradled a hand to his chest and used his elbow to support himself. With the other hand, he beat the ground to make noise. His head lulled forward as he lacked the strength to raise it.

"Hiccup!" She meant to scream it, but her voice caught in her throat. She ran to him, grasping his arms and face. The dark blotches, she noticed, were not dirt, but in fact bruises, inflicted with crude weapons. Carefully, she rolled him over and propped him up so he could lay across her lap. His eyes gazed up at her, fighting for sight but so completely blurred with tears, and swollen with contusions, he was nearly blind.

"A... As...ss...tt..." He pushed for words, his lips trembling, but he remained mute. She knew it had to do with the blossoming black mark across his rib cage, or maybe the hand-like bruises that decorated his neck.

"Oh my dear, sweet Hiccup..." She whispered. "What have they done to you?" Her hand cupped his scraped cheek and moved upward into his hair, where it became coated with a wet and sticky substance.

She already knew it was blood.

"F...Fra...ga..." He muttered.

"I know. I know." She sniffed, allowing him to rest against her breast. "TOOTHLESS!" She cried, hoping to the dragon to be nearby. "Toothless we need you! I found him!"

She brought one leg up to better support him. "I'm so sorry, Hiccup. This is all my fault. I... I shouldn't have gone in that armory!" She berated herself.

Weakly, Hiccup lifted a crushed hand and a crooked finger to her lips. He slowly shook his head. He took a long breath before biting out, "N...noth...ing...is your...fault." He gasped as his mouth

trembled. To save Astrid embarrassment, he pushed away from her. He managed to roll away just enough so he could vomit on the grass and not on her. He coughed up blood, and then got sick again. He panted harshly, then sunk back into her arms.

Astrid chewed her bottom lip in an attempt to quell the emotion stinging her eyes. Instead of responding, she shouted. "Help! Somebody help! Snotlout! Fishlegs! Ruff! Tuff!" Her voice was gravelly. "SOMEBODY! Anybody!" She touched her temple to his forehead and listened to his asthmatic breathing.

Her wits were starting to come back to her as she realized that the young man in her arms was in fact, bleeding profusely and she needed to survey his injuries and try to staunch the flow.

As far as she could tell, his nose was bleeding the most, as his face was a tell tale sign. She rubbed it off with her arm wraps, careful not to knock the tender cartilage. Dirt clung to his chest and pants, with hints of green pigment from the grass staining his skin. Under the mud, an abrasion covered his torso, looking to be inflicted from the ground. His prosthetic was missing as well. Then it hit her.

He had been crawling back to the village. For how long, she couldn't tell.

His battered chest rose and fell with each painful breath.

"It's going to be okay, I promise." She spoke, her voice hallow.

Maybe it was to comfort him and put him at ease, or maybe it was because she needed to, but her lips laid gently on his forehead. "Just hang on..."

An echoing call of a Nightfury pierced through the air.

"Finally! Toothless! Over here!" She screamed.

The ground shook with the panicked bounds of the Nightfury before he cleared the area and came to a shrieking halt in front of them. Immediately, he let out a low slow whine and licked the blood and dirt from his rider's body.

"We'll worry about that later," Astrid calmed the beast, "right now we need to get him back to the village."

Toothless rumbled lowly and laid flat to the ground, allowing Astrid to more easily lift him up.

She struggled because he was completely limp from exhaustion. He winced as her fingers grazed open wounds.

"I'm sorry, I want to help you as quick as possible."

He nodded shakily as she looped his arms around her neck. In order to keep him from jostling around, she pulled him close to her chest and held him one arm under his legs, the other securely around his lashed back. With some difficulty, she was able to slide up onto Toothless' back, as she leaned forward and kept Hiccup pressed against her.

"Go, Toothless! Go!" She urged.

Like Lightning, the dragon was off.

Astrid didn't bother steering or directing, she just focused on the hurt young man in her arms, as he struggled to hang on to her.

In time, they made it to the village. Toothless bounded across the landscape, nearly knocking people over. The villagers saw the state that Hiccup was in and immediately felt sick for gossiping. Astrid's shame was put out of the way as worry and concern took place.

"Stoick! Stoick come quick!" She shouted. Vikings rushed around, looking for the chief. With a huff, Astrid urged Toothless up to the house.

Upstairs, Astrid was able to ease the boy down onto the bed, without jarring him. His breathing was still very harsh, but he was starting to get some color back. Toothless nudged his hand and let it rest on his snout.

"What's all the ruckus?" Stoick shouted from downstairs.

"I found Hiccup, and just in time too." Astrid called back.

The chief ascended the stairs and stopped short when he saw his son. "Oh no!" he muttered. His eyes raked over his feeble state and drank in the lacerations. Without tearing away his gaze, he asked the girl, "Was it Fragonard?"

"That's what Hiccup said."

The injured boy peeked his eyes open and attempted to raise a hand. "Ah!"

"I'm here. I'm here Hiccup." She gently took his hand.

"We need a healer." Stoick stood and with a flourish, disappeared from the room.

Astrid noticed a bucket on the floor from a few nights ago, when he wiped away her tears. She withdrew the cloth and began to clean his face, doing her best to be delicate, which was not her strong suit. "What a mess."

His mouth twitched in a grin.

"Not you. I mean, you _are _a mess, but this whole thing! Why does he feel like he has to top us every time? You didn't even do anything!" She parted the hair away from his forehead. "What a jerk."

Hiccup muttered something in agreement.

She swallowed hard as she took in more of his wounds, now that she could. "It's a good thing he didn't know you were left handed. Though, you might not be working for a while." She gestured to his obviously broken hand.

He sighed.

Astrid wished he would just pass out. Seeing him lying there in pain made it so much worse. Again, she took up the rag and started to clean the dirt from his chest. "I know you told me not to touch you like this, but I'm going to ignore it."

"Sss|Stin|Stinker|" He cheeked, trying to hide his wincing.

"I'm sorry." She started. "When you and I became friends, the thing I did the most for you, was try to give you some encouragement, and maybe some companionship. I wasn't really good for anything else. But you've done so much for me. I can't even begin to explain how grateful I am, even for the little day to day things." She cupped his cheek. "Your love for me shows in everything that you do, and I'm sorry I didn't see that before."

The front door opened and footsteps were heard.

"I'm going to make it up to you, starting now, I promise." She quickly leaned in and delivered a quick kiss to his cheek.

She stood, right as the healers came into the room. She spared one last glance before she took her axe off the wall and left.

She met a worried Stoick outside. "Where did you find him?"

"In the woods," she supplied, "I believe he was crawling his way back here. I don't know where from."

"Son of a|"

"What's going to happen to Fragonard?"

"If this was any normal man, he'd be killed. It's attempted assassination on my heir! But, Fragonard is the heir of the Shivering Shores, our good friends, and they can be very hostile. We can't afford a war."

"What do you want to do?" She asked, a frightful calmness in her mien.

Stoick looked at her with wrath in his soul piercing gaze. "I want to kill him."

She raised her axe. "Then let me."

Sudden realization came over the chief as he made a determined nod.

"Where is he?"

"Probably hiding. Try the hall, maybe he's even drunk."

"Oh, goody." She rolled her eyes.

She headed in that direction as the image of Hiccup from last night

came into the forefront of her mind. He was giddy and all smiles, and so tender. His kiss even still lingered. But then, his image faded to that broken body, that shell of a soul. All her happiness dissolved. This wasn't about her anymore. Fragonard made this into something much bigger than he should have. Something much bigger than he could have imagined. Toothless of course would love to have a piece of the action, but in this situation, Astrid was perfectly content taking care of him herself. The dragon just needed to stay with Hiccup, and comfort him.

Astrid's rape had been a catalyst to stir and awaken feelings that had long since stayed dormant after her friendship with Hiccup. A streak of timorous shame came bounding forward and struck out her pride and confidence. If Fragonard hadn't dragged Hiccup into this, it was likely that he could have gone on with his merry life and Astrid may or may not have healed from the psychological wounds he gave her. But, by injuring Hiccup and giving her a reason to fight back, not out of revenge, he was in for the wrath of Astrid Hofferson. All of her hurt, rage and grief started to simmer and boil, turning into hard, blackened rage.

She pushed into the Great Hall, scanning the tables for the obnoxious pain in the ass. Indeed, he had a frothy mug in his hand as he chatted with his brothers. For the first time, she noticed that he was the only happy one. The other two looked to be guilt ridden, and slightly terrified.

At the older boy's face, her teeth grit and her blood boiled. She clenched her axe with white knuckles and stormed over to the table.

She was still a few feet off when she screamed to get his attention. "You evil, conniving, disgusting worm!"

The room was suddenly at attention.

Fragonard met her gaze with a smile. Nothing could deter his good mood. "Well, hello bitch."

"You think you can get away with what you've done!? Well, forget about it!"

"So you finally came out of shock, huh? Now, haven't you yelled at me enough? Why don't you get lost. I'm tired of looking at you."

"You keep digging your grave, now stay in it!" She snarled.

"And what are you going to do? Cut off my penis? Oh wait, you already did!" He snapped.

"I challenge you to an Einvigi!"

The crowd burst into frantic chattering. An Einvigi was a duel, but with no rules, just two warriors facing head to head. They alone would judge the winner.

Fragonard glanced around and then chuckled. "Really? You're going to pull a card like that?"

"You're a murderer." She hissed. "These laws aren't working for

me."

"So, know you want to fight me? I think it's highly unfair, considering what your little boyfriend did to me. I think the score is even."

"The score is far from even. You should still be serving for your first crime. Hiccup didn't deserve what you did to him."

"Hell yeah he did! The original terms were just for me to never return to Berk. I was okay with that. But that kid kept arguing and arguing until my final sentence was delivered, just to shut him up!"

"You really have no remorse for what you've done..." She stated bewildered.

"What's wrong with a little fun?" He grinned.

Her face spoke volumes.

His smile fell. "Fine. What are the terms? My banishment for your hand?"

"No." She bit, raising her axe. "This Einvigiâ€|**is to the death!**"

* * *

><p>So, I have most of this story written. I'm just pacing with the uploads so I can be regular (I have a busy life). So, my dilemma is what to do next. I have three ideas that I want to do equally, but I can't figure out which one I want to do first. I can't do them all at the same time. So, I want to hear what you guys have to say! Here are the options:<p>

1. What the Water Gave Me "Mer!AU. Cerulean met Viridian, like the sky meets the earth. Blue was threatening, green was terrified. 'L-Look,' whispered Fishlegs, breaking the trance. 'His-His fin...'" Hiccstrid Drama/Romance

2. Parasite "Soulsnatch dragons are rare but deadly. But as Hiccup finds out the hard way, it's the eggs you have to watch out for." Hicctooth bromance, sprinkled with Hiccstrid. Drama/Friendship

3. 320 State Street "Modern AU. It was just a job. Sandwiches. Easy. A simple way to get money. But that stupid brunet with the silly name just has to go and make things complicated." Hiccstrid Drama/Romance

So friends and followers, send in your votes! You have until this story is complete to chose!

9. Compostion

It's time for Plugs!

First, I've been beta-ing for my friend Hapciuovici and his story A New Legend. It's very good, and if you want action, I highly

recommend it!

Then, I have to mention my nearest and dearest friend in the whole world (She saved my life, that's all) ThisIsEntertaining! All of her work is phenomenal, but she just posted her first HTTYD story. It's the story from Toothless' perspective, and while that may seem cliché, she does a fantastic job with it.

She's a better writer than I am.

It's called Downed Dragon, and it's just a oneshot, but I urge everyone to go read it! She's also doing a Rise of the GuardiansXWhite Collar crossover that's really neat! So yes, everyone should go read her stuff and send her nice things because I love her so much!

Ahem, on to the story.

* * *

><p>Astrid stood rigidly still as her words still echoed on in the great hall. Fragonard stared at her blankly, probably trying to digest the information she just spat.<p>

"What?" He asked.

"You heard me."

He attempted to laugh, but it came out as a nervous squeak. "You're kidding, right?"

"I don't joke when I hold an axe in my hand." She shook it for emphasis. "I'm going to plant this blade in your skull, and I'd rather not get in trouble for it."

"What makes you so sure you could beat me in an Einvigi?" He huffed.

The head of the axe buried into the wood of the table, slicing it cleanly in half. "I. Don't. Lose."

He gulped and then faked an air of smugness. "You're full of hot air." He claimed.

The blonde lowered her tense shoulders ever so slightly. "Am I? Well, then you would have no reason to fear a fight with me, would you?"

He breathed slowly.

"So, what's it going to be? Duel with me and probably die, or deal with Stoick and definitely die?"

He looked to her sheepishly. "Well, when you put it like thatâ€¦when's the fight?"

"Tomorrow night. Sunset. Prepare, because I will." And with that, she yanked the blade from the splintering wood and stomped out of the Great Hall, Gobber following quickly behind.

"Wut happened?" He stuttered, since he had been in the hall the whole time.

"I found Hiccup," she started, her breaths ragged. "And that dirtbag in there," she pointed, "was the reason he was missing!"

"Where is 'e now?"

"Up at home. The healers are looking at him now."

"Beard of Thor, what did he do this time?"

"Beat him within an inch of his life." She bit. Her axe spun in her hand like a comforting friend. "I barely recognized him."

Gobber sighed. "So Stoick knows what you did then?"

"Yes, I told him I would."

"Okay. Well, on the bright side, Fragonard will die in either outcome."

"I need to get my honor back," she stated, "and I don't want to do it by taking away Hiccup's." With those words, she disbanded into the village.

A Gronkle pattered through the sky before landing in front of her. "Astrid!" Fishleg's called, dismounting his dragon. "Thank Odin I found you! I found this!" And he shoved Hiccup's prosthesis into Astrid's arms. It was in ill repair.

She narrowed her eyes. "Where did you find this?"

"On the East side of the island, like, as far east as you can go. It was up in tree." He glanced at it, scratching his chin. "Now, if we could just find the rest of himâ€¦"

"I did. He's up at the house." Her expression didn't change.

Fishlegs put a hand on his chest and sighed in relief. "Oh good! I was afraid we wouldn't find him!"

"The healers are with him now, but you can call the others back."

"Wait, the healers? Why? What happened?"

She didn't give a direct answer. "I found him a few miles east of the village, I guess he had been crawling back from where you found this." Bitterness was evident in her voice.

Fishlegs' eyes widened. "Where's Toothless?"

"Up sitting with him." She shrugged. "Now, go call off the search. I know Snotlout will be upset if we make him do more work then necessary."

The cubby boy nodded once before reaching out and tentatively grabbing her arm. "I'm sorry Astrid. I should haveâ€¦we should have

been there for you. We're terrible friends."

She smirked. "I forgive you."

He knew he would have to make it up to her, but for the time being, he nodded gratefully and went to call back the other teens.

The next person to approach the blonde was a man four times her size, but with an eighth of her confidence. Hamish, the chief of the Shivering Shores, and the father of Fragonard.

"Lassâ€¦are you certain you want to go through with this?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "There's nothing you can do to save him. He's gone too far this time, and he has to face the consequences."

"I know that." He huffed. "Lookâ€¦I know that Fragonard is a soul in turmoil, ever since he lost his brother, he hasn't been the same. Bloodthirsty, recklessâ€¦"

_His brother? _She wondered. Hiccup did say something about another brother named Bertrand, but she didn't give it much thought.

"I know he has to fess up to his crimes, and maybe, he can be cleansed of his sins if he does. No, lass, Astrid is it? I worry about you. I hope you know what you're doing. Acting out of anger is not strength, but blindness."

She considered his words with deep contemplation, then determinedly answered. "It's not anger, it's devotion. I'm doing this for Hiccup, not for myself."

He couldn't help but smile, just a little. It wasn't exactly the most appropriate response when talking to a girl that was going to fight your son to the death, but she earned it. With just those words, Astrid proved that revenge for her own fate wasn't on her agenda.

She earned his respect.

"Odin, what a mess." The chief sighed, a hand sliding down his face. "I guess I'll be torn, he's my son after all."

"I understand."

With a scornful smile, the chief left her, without a word.

Astrid decided that she should go up and check on Hiccup. She at least needed to hear what damage was done, because she would end up taking care of him anyway. Steeling herself for the worst, the blonde trekked up the hill.

As soon as she entered the door, she could hear strained cries of pain. Not exactly shouts, but whatever sound the boy could make with a collapsed lung.

Astrid bit her lip and ascended the stairs. Stoick spotted her immediately from his spot holding down his shoulders. The boy thrashed as the healers scrubbed the dirt from his open

wounds.

"Astrid! Take his hand!"

She hurried to his side and pried his limb from it's clamped spot on the bed boards. Instantly, his strength culminated into his hand as he held on with a vice grip. Astrid grimaced as his fingers curled around hers almost painfully. She marveled at the strength in a hand not much larger than her own. Working in forge really made a difference. Delicately, she ran her free hand up and down his arm in a comforting way, and placed soft kisses on his knuckles. His shrieks dulled and all that was heard was long, exhausted breathing.

Sweat clung to his auburn locks, most of which were concealed with bandages. His eyelashes twitched as his brow furrowed. Hiccup was exhausted, and Astrid could barely believe that he made it this long without drifting off.

It was scary enough to think he was in that much pain.

As Goãoi gently rubbed a waxy salve onto his chest, the girl listened to the other healer talking to Stoick. The chief finally relinquished his grip on Hiccup's shoulders.

"Make sure he gets plenty of rest. I know it will kill him, but there will be no high flying until his punctured lung heals. It should take a few days before he can breathe normal again." He surveyed the boy once again. "Most of his injuries should heal within the next couple of days. The burns on his good foot will probably hurt for awhile, and the lacerations on his residual limb may cause an onslaught of phantom pain or shock. I'm not sure about that though. His hand is broken, more specially three bones in his palm, and his middle and index finger. I've set the bones, but that will take a couple weeks to heal, plus a few months to get his full range of motion back. It wasn't a serious break, so once it's healed, there should be no lasting problems."

Stoick looked hopeful, before he asked, "what about his head?"

The healer looked much too grim. "Now that, I'm not sure about. His skull is fractured, so he may be a bit out of sorts when he wakes up. Speech might be slurred and disjointed, there will be confusion and memory loss. All in all, we can't know the severity until he can speak."

Soft snoring was heard and the two looked to Hiccup who had finally passed into unconsciousness.

"Correction, when he wakes up." The healer collected the spare bandages. "Keep ice on his eyes to keep the swelling down. I'll be back to check on him tomorrow." And with that, he left. Goãoi was not far behind either.

"I've got it, sir." Astrid said calmly.

"Ye need to prepare for tomorrow." He countered.

"The fight is tomorrow night. I'll stay here for the rest of the night. He needs me, Stoick."

The large man couldn't argue with that. Especially since she was most likely better at caring for patients. He agreed and left to get the ice the healer had suggested.

For the first time since entering the room, Astrid noticed that Toothless sat up on a beam. His eyes were riveted to the invalid, as his head rested on his massive paws. No doubt the dragon didn't know what to do or how to help. He had probably got pushed away by the healers, but didn't want to leave. Horrible, agonizing concern poured from his eyes.

Listlessly, Astrid stood and went to the bed that was unoccupied. A little push from her legs, and the cot slid across the floor and pressed against the used bunk, now creating one large bed.

"Toothless, you can come down now."

The dragon gently slipped off the beam and on to the floor. He sauntered over and crawled up on the bed, shifting to be nice and close without touching him. His nose pressed into Hiccup's hair. A sad murmur sang from his throat.

"I know, but he'll be okay."

Stoick was up not too long after with a ice block wrapped in cloth, and a bucket of clean water.

"I'll bring you up some dinner later, try to eat, lass."

The idea of food was not appealing to the blonde, but she was loosing weight fast. She nodded in resigned agreement.

And so she watched him, not saying a word, but holding his hand and keeping conversation with her eyes. Her thumb skirted over his knuckles of their own accord. She kept the ice block on his eyes, alternating between them to keep him comfortable. When the ice finally melted, she dabbed his sweat away with the wet cloth. When Stoick brought her food, she made sure to give him broth with a spoon. Soon, the sun had set and Astrid felt a heaviness in her lids.

She never considered herself softhearted. Maybe she wanted to wear her mother's wedding dress, and maybe she liked looking at her father's dagger that he had given her. She wouldn't admit to that either way. But with Hiccup it was different. She kept his flowers, as memories of his sweet words and her tender kisses. She memorized his doodles, appreciating his talents and perspective. And in this moment, seeing his chest rise and fall in staccato rhythms, she made another decision to consciously be soft. She raised herself to sit next to him and kicked off her boots. Her shoulder pads and armored skirt joined them on the floor. Just for tonight, she wanted to hold him. To feel a warm mass in her arms, the truth that he was really truly here. She wanted his scent to overwhelm her senses, her eyes to soak in his freckles.

So she laid beside him. Her arm came around to cradle his head as Toothless looked to her in confusion.

"We can share." She whispered back.

Her free arm draped across his shoulders and caressed his battered chest. His hair was so soft against her chin, she smiled. One leg drew over his and she snuggled close to him.

Maybe love wasn't too strong a word.

In the morning, Astrid roused with a bit of a startle. For a moment, she didn't recognize her surroundings. But she settled back down almost immediately after. Toothless and Hiccup still slept soundly, no outward evidence of either waking in the night.

Except for Hiccup's hand that rested on her own.

A blanket covered their forms and the dishes from last night had been cleared away. She figured that Stoick had come up in the night to check on them and did it.

With a soft peck to his brow, Astrid rose and began to compose herself for the day. She had a lot to prepare for, after all.

She dressed comfortably, and shouldered her axe. A part of her wanted to stay with Hiccup until he woke up, but she needed to warm up and practice. Still, he'd be safe with Toothless and doubtless that Stoick would come up and check on him often.

Satisfied, she went downstairs, made a little breakfast, then left.

The woods at the entrance of the cove was her favorite spot to practice. The trees had been softened by her blade and they were a perfect distance apart for throwing. The rocks nearby often became the perch for Hiccup as he came to vent to her about his dad.

"_Nice form_." She could hear his voice in her head. "_That tree won't mess with you again._"

Soon, the blonde fell into a pleasant repetition of landing the axe in the bark. It cleared her head, and relaxed her tension.

She heard a crack of a tree branch and turned quickly, axe raised.

"I thought I'd find you here." A deep voice said. Her axe lowered as she met the face of the last person she expected to see.

Her lip quivered as she became breathless.

"...Papa?"

"Hello, my dear." His countenance was sordid. "I heard about the fight."

"Yeahâ€¦"

He awkwardly shifted his weight onto one foot. "So, he hurt Hiccup?"

"Pretty badly, actually."

"The bastard." He huffed, glancing at the trees.

"Dad, why are you here? I thoughtâ€¦"

"I know. And, I don't expect you to forgive me right away, that must have been very painful."

She searched his face, hopeful.

In his hand, he carried his axe, twisting it in his grasp. "Maybe, you're more comfortable with your axe, butâ€¦this is my axe. The axe with the family crest on itâ€¦it would do me proud to see you carry it with you."

"You meanâ€¦?"

"We're all behind you Astrid."

Her axe fell to the dirt as she rushed to him. She threw her arms around him as he held her tight to his chest. His beard tickled her nose, and she knew that she was home. "Oh papa!"

"I'm so sorry, Astrid. I was such a fool. I like to think that I'm progressive, now that we are friends with the dragons, but in reality, I'm just as stubborn and blind as ever."

Tears bit at her eyes. "It's okay, dad."

"I love you so much Astrid, regardless of what happens to you."

"I love you too, dad."

"Now," He said, pulling away to look at her. "Training with trees is all good and well, but if you're fighting someone, you need some one-on-one training." He lifted her axe. "Now, come at me like you're trying to kill me."

â€¦"

When Hiccup finally cracked his crusty eyes open, sun was filtering in through his window. His throat was dry, but he didn't feel the need for water. He ached all over, a dull low pain, but pressure culminated at the back of his head, making him woozy. He felt a huff of hot breath on his neck and turned slightly, meeting black scales. He panicked for a moment, seeing a dragon in his bed, but then realized it was, in fact, his own dragon. Something about missing teeth. His vision swam with browns and tans of furniture of his room. His head was spinning.

Toothless gave a loud warble next to him, making his eye cross.

Hiccup's broken hand lifted and patted against the muzzle of the beast. His finger pressed against his own lips in an effort to quell the noise.

Stoick came into the room, hearing Toothless. "Well, it's about time you woke up, sleepyhead."

Hiccup turned his head to the speaker and studied this large man. He

knew he should speak and give some witty reply, but the motivation to open his mouth with nil.

"Quite the fight you got in, huh?" Stoick was waiting for the reply, 'You should see the other guy.' But he was met with silence and a completely blank face instead.

Hiccup knew this man. Knew him well, in fact. His name wasâ€¦something with a 'D'.

"Son?"

Dad! That was it. Duh.

"Won't you say something?"

He could do that. That was okay. "Ssssâ€¦" Mmm, maybe not. His nose crinkled and he opened his mouth. "Ssssssâ€¦ssoomâ€¦ssooooommmâ€¦" He never remembered talking being so hard.

"It's okay, don't strain yourself." The chief rested a hand on his head.

"Ssssssoooooommmmmmm! Ssssoommmttthhhhâ€¦thâ€¦thâ€¦thâ€¦" His head jerked at each sound, as if it took his whole being to stay one syllable. "SOMEâ€¦TH-TH-THING!" He cried.

Stoick looked horrified.

"Some-thing! Someâ€¦thing! Someâ€¦_thing_" Hiccup ranted, punching his fist on the bed frame. It was the only word he had, and a message needed to be conveyed. What that message was, he wasn't quite sure himself.

"Hiccup, calm down!"

"SOMETHING!" He shouted, the crackling in his lungs apparent in his ranting. Like a fire, pain erupted from his leg. He craned his head around and shrieked more.

His leg was gone. His left leg, was missing. _And it hurt_.

"Toothless! Hold him still, I'm going for the healer."

The dragon nudged his shoulder with his head, and brought him down to recline. Hiccup was breathing heavily, in a panic. But then, slowly, his clouded mind began to clear and he remembered, but the night before was still a bit fuzzy. He was Hiccup Horrendous Haddock, son of the chief Stoick the Vast, and the first viking to befriend a dragon. He also saved Berk from the tyrannical rule of the Red Death, at the expense of his leg. Still, everything hurt and he couldn't remember why.

The door slammed open and hurried footfalls clambered up the stairs. "Hiccup!" His father hurried into the room, followed by the healer and Gobber. "It's okay, just calm down."

He was calm, wasn't he? Maybe not, judging by the harshness of his breathing. He tried to sit up, but Toothless still weighed him

down.

The healer gently took his face and tilted it into the sunlight. He surveyed his eyes. "Talk to me." He commanded.

"Hhhhrrrrrâ€"ccckkâ€"mmmmâ€"fffaaaahhhhâ€"|" He uttered, brilliantly.

"Hmâ€"that's what I was afraid of." The man said, letting go. "Well, I have bad news and I have good news, and then I have worse news."

"Okay." Stoick urged, straightening his shoulders.

"Hiccup is having difficulties speaking because of his head injury, in fact, he's having a partial seizure."

"What?" The chief asked, bewildered.

Hiccup's arm groped in the air of it's own accord.

"His eyes. One pupil is fully dilated, while the other is not. His irises are shaking, that was the main give away."

"What's the good news?"

"It's temporary. It won't last forever."

"Then what's the worse news?"

"I don't know how long it will take him to recover afterwards or how long the seizure will last. Maybe a few minutes, maybe hoursâ€"maybe days." The healer sat down on the bed and checked the bandages as Hiccup shook his head, his eyes riveted on Stoick. "All in all, he's not going to be doing anything for awhile."

"I'll kill him!" The large man shouted. "I'll kill thatâ€" thatâ€"!" His face was as red as his beard.

"Ssssoooooommâ€"somethâ€" thâ€" thâ€" thâ€"â€"|" Hiccup's head lurched with each sound, his eyes squeezed shut in concentration.

"Maybe you shouldn't yell Stoick, it's upsetting the lad." Gobber offered.

The large man sighed, and nodded. "I need some air." He hurried from the room, unable to face his son anymore.

"JJJâ€"â€"GGooâ€"Bbbâ€"|" Hiccup tried.

"What's wrong boy-o?"

The mutilated boy waved his broken hand around, his lips forming a pout of hard confusion.

"You were beaten up, Hiccup." The older man told him. "By that creep, Frag'o'nard. You took some hits to the head, andâ€"you'll be better soon."

"Yes, just get plenty of rest, and try to keep as still as possible."

As he said it, the boys shoulders heaved in rapid succession. Toothless pressed harder to hold him steady.

"Maybe I spoke too soon." The doctor sighed.

"Hâ€"Hurâ€"hurâ€"hurâ€|.t-t-t-ssssss."

"I believe it would. You were a bloody mess. You're lucky Astrid found you when she did, you might be fairing far worse than you are now."

At the sound of Astrid's name, the memories of last night surfaced. The warmth of the forge, the heat from her trailing hands, the spark of their kiss. He carried her to bed, and then he worked on the wedding ring andâ€"

Oh no.

The wedding was today! He had to get up! Astrid needed him!

He fought to rise, despite the heavy weight that pinned him. He groaned as fire spread through his body. Fire like-

The hours of torture hit him like an instantaneous storm. Searing flesh, tearing skin, crimson tears and shouts that were never loud enough. Teeth grit, nails dug into the dirt, and blood...

Blood was split like a river.

His revelation came suddenly, as did the pain, and he arched his back with inhuman shrieks. Involuntary screams, ones of a dying animal.

He needed help, needed someone to hold him, to take all this pain away. He needed...

"SOMETHING!"

* * *

><p>Thank you to everyone who voted on the last chapter! We are at a tie, so voting is still open (and will be until the day I post the next story!) Haha!<p>

10. Culmination

VOTE. Even if you've voted already, you can vote again! It closes with the next chapter I post!

* * *

><p>It was late afternoon when Astrid decided to go back. She would need to check on Hiccup, and rest a bit before the fight. Her father had proved to be very helpful as he handed out tips and tricks. He escorted her home, secretly wanting to see how much damage was done,

and wanting to reconcile with the man that didn't give up on his baby girl.<p>

As they approached the house, they could hear Hiccup's mournful cries. Stoick, however, sat helplessly outside.

"What's happening?!" The blonde rushed to him.

"Ohâ€ he's...he'll be alright, in time. But...he can'tâ€he's so confused!" The man rubbed his face. "It's his head. Only knows one word. Just...it's heartbreaking lass. You don't have to go up there."

She tightened her grip on her weapon. "He was there for me, in my darkest time. I need to return the favor."

Determined, she went inside followed by her curious father and a concerned chief.

She found her dear friend sitting in his bed. His body was wrapped in bandages. He was doubled over, his arms firmly around the dragon's head as he sobbed uncontrollably. His fingernails scratched over scales at a decibel she could hear, but Toothless only warbled softly.

"Hiccup?" She asked gently, approaching him. The healer and Gobber were in the room, silently observing the boy and waiting for his seizure to subside.

With accentuating breaths, he looked towards her. She could see his eyes alight with untapped energy as they bounced around.

"Uhâ€Uhâ€Uhâ€Uhâ€|" was all he could muster.

She sat next to him on the bed and tenderly touched his head. "You'll have quite the bump, huh? Scared me, a bit. It wasn't your fault of course." She shrugged.

"FFFâ€fffâ€ffffâ€|.uhâ€uhâ€|"

"Oh, that jerk? Don't even think about him. He's good asâ€dead."

"Ahâ€ahâ€ahâ€ahâ€|" He closed his eyes in concentration, while resting a hand on her shoulder. "SSsâ€sstrrâ€â€|" His nose scrunched.

"Asssstttrrrriiidddddâ€|" She said slowly, stressing her mouth's movements.

"Assttâ€trâ€rrâ€rrrRRRRrrrrRRRRrrrrrâ€|." His head shook violently. "RID!" He popped.

She smiled.

"Iâ€Iâ€I lllâ€ll-lloovvâ€|"

She knew what he wanted to say, and she had an answer for him this time. But, to her surprise, he stopped and his shoulders sunk. He had

gotten discouraged with his inability to talk.

She chewed her lip, wanting him to keep talking. "Who's this fellow here?" She patted Toothless on the nose. "His name is a little harder."

Hiccup didn't even try. He rested his cheek on the cool scales and said without stuttering, "Bud."

Astrid couldn't help but smile a bit.

"Why don't you let Hiccup sit up, Toothless?" She asked, calmly. The dragon dislodged himself from pinning the boy down, and wriggled behind him, so he could lean back. Astrid pulled the blankets up a little more. "There we go. Nice and comfy. You want some water?"

He nodded.

She drew a ladle of fresh water, and brought it up to him. He reached for it with shaky hands.

"You'd better let me help you, sweetheart."

Instantly, she blushed. _Sweetheart_? As in an endearing nickname? Where in Midgard had that come from? Granted, his behavior resembled a child, and made it difficult to treat him normally. Though, maybe in this fragile state, he wouldn't mind.

She brought the ladle up to his lips and cupped his head to hold him still. He only drank about half of it. The rest spilled down his chin.

"Whoops, let's clean that up." And she dabbed his face with a dry cloth. "There, all better."

"Hhhhsssss...rrrrrrrâ€"fffff..." He worked for words, he had so much he wanted to ask, nothing would come out.

"It's okay. Slow down."

He was quickly becoming frustrated with his inability to communicate. "Wwhaaaâ€"...ttâ€"ttâ€"ttâ€"...hap..." His shoulders jerked and he groaned miserably. Under his breath, he tried speaking, but it was all jibberish.

"At least he's not flailing anymore." The doctor conceded.

"What's wrong with him?" Astrid asked softly.

"He's having a traumatic seizure. I'm beginning to worry the longer it lasts."

Hiccup understood everything as he reached out for her. His trembling hand came to rest on her rib cage. Using what strength he could, he pulled himself closer to her. Astrid eased him over to lay against her chest.

"If you could get him to calm down, maybe it would subside. He's scared."

"I know." She whispered. She gently patted his battered head and hummed idly as stray sobs cut through the air here and there.

"_Gladly, one Sun's day, I waited and waited with flowers in my arms for the dream I'd created. I waited 'til dreams, like my heart, were all perfect. The flowers were alive and the words need not be spoken. The joy that I knew was beyond all believing. The beat of my heart was soft and relieving._

"Gladdest of Sun's days."

It didn't matter that her father was there. Or that the chief and Gobber were. The whole town could have been watching, but she didn't care. Right now, it was all about Hiccup.

He helped her heal, now it was time to repay the debt.

"_Then came a Sun's day when you came to find me. They bore me to hall and I found you beside me. My eyes were filled with one who astounds me. The earth and the flowers are forever around me. The bell chimed for me and the wind whispered, "Lover!"_

"And for you I have cared and I bless you forever..."

"The best of all Sun's days."

Like a rock rolls from a precarious perch, Hiccup breathed a sigh of relief. His shoulders relaxed as his breath ghosted across her arms. His trembling came to a stop. "Th-Th-Thaâ€|aaaâ€|nks." He muttered. It was easier to speak now, but the seizure seemed to linger.

The healer came near and surveyed Hiccup's eyes. "Ah, his pupils are the same size now, and they've stopped shaking." He nodded once to the chief and the other men in the room, indicating that they should leave. "We'll be downstairs if he needs anything."

The teens didn't reply as Hiccup nuzzled closer to her.

She dipped her head to rest a cheek in his hair.

"Whyâ€" whyâ€" whyâ€" why cry?" He stuttered.

"What?" Confused, she wiped her cheeks, surprised to find them slick with tears that she was unaware she cried.

"Noâ€" noâ€" no need...not to you..."

"I know I'm not the one that's hurt." She clarified.

"Nâ€" nâ€" nâ€" not you."

"No Hiccup," she sniffed, "I just don't like seeing you in pain. I told you before, I act strong, but I'm really not." He heard her swallow. "This should have never happened to you. No matter what you might think. And...you are...very precious to me." She bit her lip, trying to find the words, before dropping a kiss to his head. "I'm frustrated for you." She pulled away from him.

"Youâ€"youâ€"youâ€"ssppuhâ€"speakâ€"fâ€"for meâ€" " He nodded.

She released an empty laugh. "I'm awful at one sided conversations. You know that." She helped him ease back so he could rest against Toothless.

The dragon purred, content, just knowing that his boy was now safe and was being taken care of.

"Are you comfortable? Do you need anything?"

He grinned, answering both questions for her.

"Gee, when you're trying to think of something to say, that's when you have nothing." She joked.

He nodded and then coughed.

"I'd tell a story, but I'm no good at those."

Hiccup scrunched up his nose, preemptively.
"Whâ€"whâ€"whâ€"whâ€"atâ€"hâ€"hap to Ffffrag?"

"What happened to Fragonard?" She twisted her lips. "Well, he'sâ€"being sentenced to death...sort ofâ€" "

The quirked brow was a sign of confusion.

There was no beating around the bush. "I challenged him to an Einvigâ€"loser dies."

Immediately, he was protesting. Warbled speak vomited from his mouth as he groped for her, cupping her face and arm.

"Hiccup, he needs to be stopped, and I'm the one to do it."

He shook his head frantically in protest.

"This is my chance! I can regain my honor, Hiccup! I won't have to be ashamed anymore! If I am willing to put my life on the line to kill him, I can join our society again."

His shaking became harder as he cried a feeble,
"Nnnnuuhhhhâ€" "

"Will you stop that! You're making it worse!" She grabbed his head.
"You can't stop me Hiccup. What he did was wrong, and you know it. I need to do this."

He broke away, shouting.

"Stop being so childish! You want to kill him as much as I do! But, I'm outside the law now. I can fight!"

Tears slipped through his swollen eyelids.

"Now, come on. Have a little faith in me. After all, I'm doing this for you."

That didn't make him feel any better about the situation.

"Whâ€"whâ€"whâ€"when?"

"Tonight, at sunset."

He looked devastated.

"Why is this so terrible? I could really use your support on this. Are you really that afraid?"

He sighed slowly, his eyebrows furrowing.
"Nnnâ€"noâ€"youâ€"stâ€"strong. Win." He confirmed.

"Then what is it?"

He peered up at her. "Nnâ€"noâ€"wâ€"wedding?"

Her heart sunk with realization. He had assumed that she was doing this to get out of marrying him. Those were tears of rejection. She couldn't help but smile though, at least he thought she could win. She leaned in and kissed his cheek, letting her lips linger. "No, Sweetheart," there was that word again, "That's the last reason I'd do this."

That seemed to sedate him, at least for the moment.

She gathered his face into her hands, to make him meet her eyes. "But let's worry about that after you heal, okay?"

"Uh-huh." He whispered.

She sat with him, and helped him recover his speech. He didn't make much progress. As the day went on, she became more and more afraid.

He was behaving literally like a child. He took the stuffed dragon that sat on his bed frame and played with it as she talked. He babbled incoherently, not even realizing that she couldn't understand him.

Astrid began to wonder just how much damage had been done.

It was a little after Gobber made supper, that Stoick beckoned her for the fight. She patted the boy's hand in reassurance, and then stood, a coldness suddenly and irrevocably setting into her bones.

The chief led her through the village. Those that were outside, stood at attention, their fists over their hearts. A sign of good faith, and respect. Somehow, the gesture made her throat feel thick and hard to swallow. Stoick guided her a little ways away from the arena, where GoÃ°i and her parents were waiting. Family armor was presented and secured, reassuring her of her family's support. Final tips were given as well as hugs and apologies. Finally, they prayed over her, asking the gods for her safety.

Her entourage followed her to the ring, where she entered while they departed into the stands. Astrid set her axe on the ground and stretched to loosen up. Her muscles moved easily and painlessly with each movement. She was ready for this. She had trained for this.

It was when she was pulling her arms over her head when she heard footsteps entering the arena. She peered over, not expecting her opponent so soon. But in fact, it was not Fragonard, but his spineless brothers. They shuffled in awkwardly, looking sheepish.

She didn't feel the least bit threatened. Eyes of the audience watched carefully, and even if her axe was on the ground, she could take these two numbskulls any day of the week. Still, she sneered at them.

"What do you want?"

The older of the two stepped forward and held out his hand to her. "To wish you luck."

"Ha, is this some type of dumb joke?" She rested a hand on her hip.

The younger one looked earnest as he pleaded. "We beg you—you have to win!"

Her eyebrows furrowed. "You want me to kill your brother?"

"Only because it's a matter of time before he kills us." Stated the older one. "I'm Zugno, and my younger brother is Giaquinto." The younger teen awkwardly waved. "Our father doesn't know the extent of Fragonard's barbarity. You may not think so, but you were lucky. There—there were others."

Instantly, Astrid's blood began to boil. "Why did you not stop him then!?"

Giaquinto spoke up in a quivering voice. "You have heard of our oldest brother, Bertrand? Everyone thinks he was killed by a dragon—but really, it was Fragonard. He killed him while they were out hunting together. But, we are the only ones to know—and if we tell..."

Things were beginning to get crystal clear as she looked at the two brothers that seemed terribly ashamed of their actions. She supposed she didn't hate them as much as Fragonard. They helped him, but during her experience, they were silent and held her still. They were following orders, because they were afraid for their lives.

"How long has this been going on?"

"A few years," replied Zugno. "Not a day passes that he does not threaten us. We can barely sleep at night, knowing what we have done and what lies before us—Bertrand would be furious!"

"Why did he kill your brother?"

"Bertrand was the oldest, and he was in line for the chiefdom. Nay was he perfect, but he was certainly better suited for it than Fragonard."

Astrid shook her head in disbelief. "So, yes, I plan on killing this bastard. But, what are you guys going to do when I do?"

"We have done our best to pay for our crimes. Naturally, there will always be more we can do. We have both prepared to pass up the mantle to our younger brother, Pater. He resembles Bertrand in a nice way. Still, we will do whatever it takes to satisfy you." Zugno answered.

"And," added in Giaquinto, "we did that too." He pointed to the stands.

Astrid followed his point and smiled. Hiccup was sitting in a cart, looking comfortably propped up with pillows and furs. Their four good friends sat around him and chatted, like everything was alright with the world. He caught her looking and waved back the best he could. The other teens joined as well.

"Your blacksmith helped us. Goober? Once we explained everything to him, he let us move Hiccup. He was a bit frightened though, and his dragon barely let us touch him."

"Thank you." Astrid amended. And she meant it. A part of her really wanted Hiccup to be here with her, rooting for her. But of part of her didn't want him to see the act she would commit.

"We don't expect you to forgive usâ€|but we are truly sorry for all the pain we've caused you." They both bowed their heads.

"Did you apologize to Hiccup?" She asked gently.

"Multiple times." Answered Giaquinto.

"Then I forgive you."

The boys smiled at her, looking as free as criminals being released after years of guiltless torture. "Thank you! Oh thank you!" Zugno shook her hand. "You won't regret this! We promise!" And with true joy, the two hurried from the arena to find a good spot to watch their tormentor's demise.

Astrid glanced back up to the teens sitting around Hiccup. The invalid was animatedly telling them something, but at their confused faces, she figured they couldn't understand him. Sadly, she finished her stretching.

Fear is a terrible thing to live in. She knew it. The two boys knew it. Hiccup knew it all too well. Fear will drive the greatest of men to insanity. As she tightened the grip on her axe, she wondered if her fear had been holding her back all along. In truth, she just wanted to go back, when life made sense.

But she couldn't.

Only pave the way for a new kind of life. One that would be better in the end.

Still, fear was a paralyzer. It chews on the soul and stops the heart. Her axe was an anchor, holding her sanity in an ocean of uncertainty. She twirled it by the handle, letting the blade swoop through the air. A long breath of air parted from her lips.

"I'm ready." She whispered.

The gate to the arena cranked open. The heat against the stone floor blurred and distorted the figure sauntering into the ring. He had a sword in his hand and a shield in the other. A heavy iron mask hid his face as his armor clinked with each step. Somehow, seeing him like this made the fight seem even more real, if that was even possible.

He stopped a few feet in front of her and lowered his weapons.

"My friends and family," Stoick began, "it is with a heavy heart that I welcome you to tonight's Einvigi. We all wish it could be avoided, but with the tragedies that've befallen our tribe in the last week...I don't think it's possible. I am not the only one here that feelsâ€|disturbed by what has happened." He looked over to Hiccup who was oblivious to his gaze. "But I am confident that we as a people can move past this slight and be a family once again."

Astrid sighed. She could only hope.

"Now, the combatants have decided to make this Einvigi to the death. No rules. Justâ€|whoever is left standing." He raised his arms. "Astrid and Fragonard, please face each other in the middle of the ring."

The two came to a stand off.

"Good luck." Fragonard hissed.

"Good riddance." She sneered back.

Stoick shouted again. "About face!"

The teens turned their backs on each other and paced ten steps.

"On my mark."

They both turned, weapons raised, and waited.

"Fight!"

With unyielding fury, she leapt. Her feet closed in as a shriek ripped from her throat. His eyes narrowed like arrows, piercing her with fear. Still, she would not waver. Their weapons met in a clash of metal, sparks flying and hands numb from the vibrations. She pulled back and struck again, and was parried by his sword. Her blade sliced against his own, scraping the metal and pushing her farther away. Fragonard swooped downward, releasing her before striking in an arch. Astrid had just enough time to block with the crest of the axe. Her hands trembled as she held him at bay, but he pressed hard against her block.

She underestimated him. She assumed that he would be weak and powerless without his brothers. But she was wrong. Fragonard was fighting for his life, and fighting for her silence.

Astrid leaned in and shoved him back with her foot, before swiveling and landing a blow. He blocked it with his shield. There, the blade held firm and nestled into the wood.

"You're mine," He hissed, plunging his sword towards her.

He underestimated her. She twirled her hands around the hilt of her axe and re-gripped it, then, with a speed he couldn't comprehend, she flipped backwards. The motion ripped the axe from it's hold and splintered his shield.

"You were saying?" She spit back.

Impressed, but none the less annoyed, he careened the edge of the shield toward her. Astrid repelled it with her arm, but still took on a hit.

"You're fighting much better then you were that night. I'm curious," he brought his sword down for her to parry, "did you not care what was happening to you? Maybe you actually wanted it, but then decided to rat me out. You're disgusting."

She snarled and heaved her blade. "I'm fighting harder now because I know that I don't have to hold back to be polite!" Their blades clashed again before he sought refuge behind his shield, her axe being buried once again.

As the fight went on, the crowd was screaming frantically, trying to give Astrid every bit of advice as they could. "_Go for his neck!" "Kick him in the stomach!" "Beat his ass!"_

Off to the side, Hiccup was sitting pensively and silent. His hands clutched the stuffed dragon as he sat helplessly. He wanted to cheer for her, he wanted her to know that he was proud of her, that he supported her.

"Aâ€"Aâ€"Aâ€"Astâ€|rrrRRRrrrrrrRRRâ€|" He fought. His fist pounded on the side of his cart.

"What's wrong Hiccup?" Fishlegs asked, concerned.

"Aâ€"Aâ€"Aâ€"AHH!" His body tightened up before his shoulders shook. Furs were flung to the side as his legs jerked around.

"Whoa!" Fishlegs grabbed him and pinned him. "Calm down! It's going to be okay!"

Hiccup shook his head vehemently. Until this fight was over, nothing would be okay. "AAâ€"Ahh! Aâ€"Asstrrrrâ€"rrâ€"rrâ€"!"

"You can do it!" Snotlout confirmed in an uncharacteristic show of sympathy. For once he didn't see his cousin as a target for insults. This state of invalidity did not suit him.

Not anymore.

The fight moved on. Astrid disarmed Fragonard of his shield, not that it was of use to him anymore. Now it was just a battle of steel.

They circled each other, menacingly, waiting for an opening.

"I was going to make this quick and easy," snarked Fragonard. "But you fight pretty well, for a girl."

She didn't heed his back-handed compliment. "You showed Hiccup no mercy, you shall receive none as well!" Her blade swooped low and slashed his shins.

Fragonard recoiled and hissed in pain. "That will be your only hit, girl!"

"I beg to differ!" And her axe collided with the side of his head, knocking against his helmet. It knocked him off balance so that she could attack again. "You're a foolish boy with no future. You will die in this ring, because you have nothing to fight for! Don't you know your family has disowned you?!" His helmet flew off his head with her third strike. While she was in the trough of her swing, he shot out and grabbed her hair. She leaned over, unsteady, as he raised his sword to strike the back of her neck. While it hurt, Astrid pulled back at the last second, yanking his hand back with her. The tension pulled at her roots and made a few tears leak out, but his sword cut through her hair instead of her neck.

Her unraveling braid hung solitarily in his grip. Astrid only briefly considered the fact her hair had been mangled before jumping back into the fight.

Fragonard only had mere seconds to drop her plait and throw up his sword to protect him from the next blow. "You aren't worth the effort it takes to strike you down!" She hissed.

"That's enough!" He shouted back. He pushed back her weapon and charged, bashing his sword repeatedly against her hold. "I'm not the one who's been disgraced! I am only disabled because of you and yourâ€|whining! The real world will tear you apart, little girl! What makes you think this fight will change anything?"

"It'll change everything!" She kicked his stomach and he stumbled back. They both panted and came to a stand off. "People need to know that what you did is not just wrong, it's inhuman! I was punished for your actions, and you are going to suffer as I have suffered!" She screamed, her voice breaking. Her feet pounded against the ground as her axe raised.

PANG!

Astrid knocked the sword out of his hands.

Terrified, Fragonard flung himself backwards to dodge her next attack. He scrambled and caught up his weapon. She bolted at him, but he threw his blade up at the right time and sliced her side. Astrid recoiled quickly, holding the wound, and that was all the opening that the boy needed. He kicked off to the side and hit her in the knee.

The young woman hit the ground hard, the air knocking from her lungs. He recovered as she fell. The tip of his blade pierced her sternum, pinning her to the ground.

"Any last words?"

No....

She couldn't believe it. A stupid trip and it was all over. Her bloodied hand grasped at her side as she panted. This couldn't happen. So many people were rooting for her. She promised so many others that she would stop him. She would let everyone down, and prove that she really was worthless.

She looked up to her beloved friend in the stands, so afraid of failing him. To her horror, he was seizing. His leg kicked around as he fought against Fishlegs. Suddenly, she was filled with undying incitement. This fight was not over.

"I have a few," she smirked. A brilliant idea hit her like a lighting bolt. "TOOTHLESS!" She called.

The Nightfury sat at attention from where he was at the base of Hiccup's cart.

"Plasma blast!"

His eyes dilated and he shot the sword away, then he shot Fragonard himself for good measure, just enough to knock him off his feet.

It was a race for the discarded weapon. Fragonard reached it first, but was not able to get to his feet in time. Astrid's blade sunk into his wrist, severing his hand from his body. He screamed wildly in pain.

The blonde caught his neck in the crook of her axe, silencing his cries, and forbidding him to even swallow.

"That wasn't fair!" He moaned.

"There were no rules." She corrected. "If anything, it's all fair now."

"Please," He choked. "D-Don't kill me! I beg you! I'll do anything!"

"Cry." She demanded.

He did.

"Scream for help."

He did so.

Finally, she narrowed her eyes. Her gaze tore through him and burned his soul like fire. He whimpered.

"Did I deserve what you did to me? Did I deserve to be raped?"

"I just wanted to have some fun!" He whispered.

"Did I deserve to be raped?!" She barked.

His answer was a breath. "No!"

"But you deserve to die." She heaved her axe from the ground and lifted it high into the air. With a shriek, she brought it back

down.

Hiccup fought with every fiber of his being to shake the tremors that bound him. Astrid needed him. She had almost lost back there, if it had not been for Toothless. He pushed himself up as Fishlegs focused back on the fight. As Astrid's axe reach the apex of it's arch, everything seemed to stop. His shaking froze, his haggard breathing ceased, and all was riveted on the young woman's actions.

The last thing to go through Fragonard's head, besides her axe, was to wonder where in Midgard had he gone wrong.

11. Confessions

Final chapter! And to think this started out as a one shot. Thank you all for your continued support, and be sure to read the author's note at the bottom!

* * *

><p>She just stood there. The moment was frozen in time. The air was stale and her axe fell listlessly from her hands. The crowd was cheering, but she didn't hear it. She was too focused on the blood that had splattered over her. Her eyes riveted to the red that pooled on the ground, and the body that would never move again.<p>

Part of her was elated.

The rest was mortified.

She had killed a man. Regardless of his hateful heart and dirty hands, he was a human, and he was dead because of her. She had been trained to fight, to kill. But to kill dragons, before anyone knew they had a soul. Nothing could have prepared her for this. She stumbled a few steps back and vomited on the ground. Her head was spinning, maybe it was because of the wound in her side. Abandoning the body and her family's axe, she staggered out of the arena.

Right outside the gate, people were pooling around, waiting to embrace her, to congratulate her, but she slipped through them like a ghost. She nodded at their praises. A few 'thank you's slipped from her lips, but all in all, she just wanted to get away.

A firm grip on her arm pulled her into the moment, and she was facing Snotlout. "That was awesome!" He praised.

She tugged at her arm and he released her, but followed as she pushed through the crowd. "I never got the chance to apologize forâ€|well, you knowâ€|being a dick."

"It's okay." She said quickly.

"No, it wasn't. I'm your friend Astrid, and I should have been there for you. I should have been a shoulder for you to cry on." There was a hint of flirtiness to his tone.

"It's okay." She stated again, wanting to postpone the conversation.

"But the fact of the matter remains that I was pissed about the whole thing. I wasn't mad at you, I was mad at the fact that I wasn't supposed to talk to you because of tradition, and I was pissed at Fragonard forâ€” well, yeah. 'Nough said."

She stopped, and looked at him. "Really?"

"Yes, andâ€” I'm sorry. Friends?"

A smile graced her face as she was freed momentarily from her deep contemplation. Snotlout was prideful, and seeing him apologize was a sign of great humility. "Friends." She stated.

She allowed him a quick hug before everything caught up with her again.

"Way ta go, lass! Pure poetry!" A voice stuck out.

"Gobber," she focused on him. "Tell Hiccup I'm sorry, and that I'll be home later."

"What? Wait!"

She didn't listen as she pushed passed the celebration. She didn't care. Astrid whistled for her Nadder and as soon as the dragon touched down, the blonde jumped on her back and fled, leaving the confused but elated crowd in the dust.

She just needed to be alone.

Astrid steered Stormfly to the cove. From the high walls, the sunlight that was left did not penetrate the area and it was cool. She was thankful for it, as she still sweat with exhaustion. Digging through Stormfly's saddle bag, she found a clean rag and some soap. No bandages though, she had used those all up. Stripping off her armor and blood stained clothes, she dove into the cold lake where the filth evaporated from her skin.

The night was still and quiet, only disturbed by her subtle splashes and Stormfly's occasional squawks. The blonde let herself float. Yes, her wounds stung in the water, and doubtless blood was seeping from her like smoke into the sky, but she needed this.

She needed her heart to slow down. She scrubbed herself clean of Fragonard's blood, which coated her hands and even clung to her hair. Even though she wallowed in the pool, she still felt the grip of filth upon her.

She dove under, the silence of the water didn't calm the barrage of tumultuous thoughts in her mind. It only served to exemplify her solitude. She sank deeper and deeper into darkness, like her mind into despair. Her hair spilled from it's braid as her hands combed through it. Bubbles escaped her lips and disappeared as they surfaced.

The only sound was her heart thundering in her ears.

Astrid broke the surface with a gasp. Her chest heaved, starved for oxygen. She treaded the water, begging for a sense of cleanliness it could give her.

But it didn't come.

Giving up, she dragged herself out and dried off with the rag. Finally, she secured it to the wound with a string, just to hold it in place before she bandaged it up properly. She slipped on her dirty clothes, but dumped the rest of her armor in her saddle bag. She didn't even want to look at it.

"Okay girl," she told her dragon. "Let's go."

The Nadder once again took to the sky. Instead of going home, however, the duo flew to the house at the highest point on the island. The home of her new dear friend.

As soon as her feet hit the porch, she was running to the door. "GoÃ°i!"

The elder was calm as the blonde burst into her home. Her eyebrows raised slightly at the dampness of her appearance, but she waved her over to sit down, none the less.

Astrid fell hard into her chair and sobbed aloud.

GoÃ°i saw the fight. She watched the events play out with a stillness in heart and soul. She so badly wanted the girl to succeed, but she was terrified for her at the same time. She was lucky to come out as unscathed as she did. The older woman sat nearby and lifted the slashed fabric that covered the wound at the girl's side.

Astrid leaned away to allow the elder to treat her cut.

"It's pretty deep." The woman sighed. "But you'll survive." She rose to gather supplies.

In all honesty, the pain in her side was the last thing that bothered her.

Silk was threaded through her flesh to keep it together and stanch the flow. It stung, each stitch of the needle elicited whimpers from her lips. But Astrid merely kept her head in her hands. She was strong, and this physical pain was nothing. At least, that's what she told herself.

She wiped her tears as GoÃ°i applied salve to help the wound and fight infection. "Thank you," she said softly.

"There is something else," she spoke, "Something else is wrong."

Astrid glanced to the floor and sighed with dismay.

"You have to tell me these things. Despite what those idiots down the hill think, I cannot read minds."

Astrid let a grin ghost across her face before meeting her eyes. She swallowed hard. "Iâ€¦I feel sick. I thoughtâ€¦ shouldn't I feel satisfaction? Shouldn't I be proud of what I did? Butâ€¦Iâ€¦ all I feel is disgust! I feel dirty and gross andâ€¦oh GoÃ°i, it's just the same as a few nights ago!"

GoÃ°i cupped the girl's face and ran her hand through her cropped hair. "That's normal. No one should ever be happy about killing someone, no matter how much they deserved it." She stood and shuffled over to her fire place where tea was brewing. "Death is ugly, but a part of life. There is no avoiding it, and the sooner you realize it, the easier it will be to handle." She poured a cup and handed it to the blonde. "I know what I'm talking about."

She took the tea and sipped on it. The liquid warmed her from the inside. "Soâ€|what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Well, there are two ways people deal with it. They either mediate on it and wallow in it, letting their actions define themselves, or they put it behind them."

Astrid pursed her lips in thought.

"Of course, just letting it go is easier said than done. But you have many people who can help you." She took the girl's hand again. "What you did was good and honorable."

"Butâ€|â€|" She shut her eyes hard before looking GoÃ°i in the eyes. "Who am I to judge if he deserved it? I was so sure, but nowâ€|"

The old woman sat patiently as she collected her thoughts.

"Right before I let my axe drop, I asked him if I deserved to be raped and he said no. But he did it anyway. What ifâ€" what if he didn't deserve to die, but my angerâ€|and I justâ€|"

"Astrid." She touched her knee. "It is not up to us to decide if a person should die. But Fragonard's heart was so eclipsed by hatred and revenge, there was no other way to stop him. Any other punishment, and someone would have ended up dead; someone who did nothing wrong."

Astrid nodded in understanding and wiped her eyes again.

"His punishment was death. Stoick would have sentenced him to it, without a doubt. But for you to step in, you saved the tribe from the wrath of the Shivering Shores. And you restored your honor. It wasn't easy, but it's okay now."

She nodded, letting GoÃ°i's answer sink in. "Thenâ€|what do I do now?"

GoÃ°i gave an affectionate smile. "Go home. Take care of Hiccup. Leave this all behind you." She touched her cheek. "The healing process can finally begin."

Astrid smiled at the kind gesture.

"Let me get you some salve and tea for him, to help with the pain."

"Okay."

"This is for you too, just so know."

"I'll be fine."

"Now my dear, you need to take care of yourself too. You're both injured, don't ignore it."

Astrid sighed in defeat. "Alright."

Laden with tea and canisters of salve, the young woman made the flight home. As she made Stormfly comfortable for the night, her mind began to wander. The drama was all over. There was nothing pressing to worry about. It was about time she righted some wrongs, confessed things that should have been said by now. He deserved that much from her.

Stepping into the house, she found Stoick, Spitelout, Gobber, and her father seated at the table deep in discussion. When she entered, they all turned to look at her.

She gulped heavily, assuming the worst, but three of them smiled.

"Come on in lass, we were just talking about you." Stoick urged.

She came closer, and set the salve on a counter by the wall. "I hope it's nothing bad." She said, a bit hopeless.

Stoick stood and came towards her, holding a hand out to place on her back. "I think someone has something they want to say to you."

Spitelout, while stubborn and a bit stupid, could, on occasion, understand when he was wrong. "Iâ€"â€|" he faltered. "I was the one who told others about what happened to you, after the first trial. That's why the rumor spread so quickly. It was wrong and I'm sorry. You have proved to be a valuable asset to this tribe, and I hope you don't hold this against me or my family."

She couldn't really, up until then, her beef had been with the Shivering Shores boys. Snotlout had already asked for forgiveness. She shrugged, "Vikings are stubborn, it happens."

The three that had already made their peace burst into laughter before Spitelout joined in. No doubt the gifts from guilty clan members would start parading in at any moment.

"E's upstairs, lass." Gobber stabbed a thumb toward the stairs.

She nodded in gratefulness before taking a few steps.

"The wedding still on?" Her father asked, eager.

Immediately, her face colored red. "Uhâ€"â€|"

"Not until he's healed, of course. Maybe about a month." Stoick nodded.

"We should get the preparations underway. Start sending out invites."

"Except the Shivering Shores. They aren't invited."

The men laughed at the joke as Astrid still stood flustered.

"So," Stoick asked. "What'll it be lass? It's up to you."

He had given her a choice. Allowed her to decide. That was something she had been denied from the beginning, now her life was truly in her hands again. And as they promised, she came out okay.

Her body was acting without consent as she threw her arms around her chief.

"I'll marry him." She whispered.

"Obviously." Gobber elbowed her father, chuckling.

The blonde let go with a beaming smile and skipped up the stairs. She was well aware that everyone was watching, but she shamelessly pulled the curtain closed.

Hiccup reclined in his bed, slightly propped up, no doubt waiting for her. But his eyes were closed in slumber. She had come too late, as she didn't have the heart to wake him when he finally had gotten to sleep. Toothless was curled up next to him, his snout under his rider's hand. It was a picture of serenity.

With a soft sigh, she treaded over to her chest and the end of the bed and pulled out clean clothes, exchanging the bloody ones she wore. As she had her back turned to him, she heard him speak.

"S-So, the conquering h-hero returns."

She glanced over, startled at first, but his eyes were still closed in rest. She smiled as she continued to dress. "Yeahâ€|sorry I was so lateâ€|I needed to talk to GoÃ°i."

"Ev-everything okay?"

Now dressed, she took a seat on the bed and he opened his eyes. "I get a cool battle scar." She shrugged, lifting up the hem of her shirt.

His good hand lightly grazed the top of the stitching. "I-I h-h-h-have one like that, r-r-rightâ€|" He glanced down at his bandaged sides. "S-somewhere." He shrugged. "We match."

She smirked. "What about you? You seem to be doing better."

"I-I-I had an episode during the f-fight."

"I know."

"B-but after, my speech has continued to improve."

She exhaled strongly. "What a relief."

They sat in silence for a while before she brought her leg up so she could rest on it. She was exhausted, but wanted to spend time with him instead.

"T-Thank you, by the way."

"Hmm?"

"For saving me, and t-taking care of me. I would have d-d-d-died out there."

She shook her head. "It's the least I could do."

"Y-you don't owe me anything, Astrid."

"And neither do you." Her hand went to the side of his face, where her fingers danced in his hair, traced the shell of his ear, and her thumb smoothed over his eyebrow. "I'm so lucky to have someone like you in my life."

"W-well, I am pretty f-f-fantastic." Besides the stuttering, he managed to look smug.

"Yeah, I guess you are." She crinkled her nose as she smirked.

The look on his face preceded his question. A look of hesitation and fear, but adoration and hope. It was as if he was putting everything on the line by asking this one simple thing. "D-Do you love me?"

She was sure she would blush and become nervous.

But she didn't.

Instead, her lips curled pleasantly as she leaned forward and showered his face in featherlight kisses.

Their noses touched. "Ask me again." She whispered.

His cheeks were tinged pink, but he was certainly elated. "D-d-d-d-do y-you l-l-lâ€"â€|" In fact, he was so elated, he was tripping over his words.

"Yes." Astrid answered, before he hurt himself. "I love you."

All of their previous touches and kisses had been building up to this one. Chaste pecks that said, 'I like you' and hugs that spoke volumes would be but mere cherished memories. She imagined an explosion of ecstasy, sparks flying and smoldering touch.

But when his hand cradled her neck and her lips sought out his, there was only relief. Sheer contentment in mutual understanding, and the privilege of being in love and returned the favor. She loved him. Truly and wholly, she knew it. She was sure of it now. Even when she deepened the kiss and let his taste seep into her lips, she knew that she belonged with him. She should have been more gentle with him, but she couldn't help wrapping her arms around his frail form and bringing him closer to her.

They parted, she instantly missed him. So she crashed her lips against his again. A kiss that healed her battered soul. An embrace that eased the ache in her heart. A touch that soothed the twinge of her ruined body.

He loved her.

"I'm sorry." She whispered, her lips grazing his as she spoke. "I'm sorry it took so long to confessâ€¦I had to make sure, to know for certain how I felt. You deserved to hear the absolute truth. Not just me returning the favor."

She propped up on her elbows and looked down at him. His eyes were glassy, but his mouth curved into a content grin. "I-I-I'd wait forever." He whispered back.

Her thumb traced the smooth texture of his lips. "I never thought that love was an emotion I was capable of. I meanâ€¦I love my parents, but that's kind of obligatory. I love you becauseâ€¦you saved me."

A soft confusion clouded his eyes.

"I couldn't love anyone, because I didn't love myself. But you made me turn from the way I saw myself, and loved me despite all my burdens and flaws. I was not the hiccup that you were, I was respected from a young ageâ€¦but you had more of a will to live than I."

His eyebrows rose in concern. "Astridâ€¦"

"But your friendship and kindnessâ€¦it pulled something out of me that I didn't think I had. I wanted you to succeed, I wanted to support you in all your endeavors. It just took me a while to realize why." She strayed to pressing affectionate caresses to his cheek, jaw, and then into his neck. "I love you, Hiccup."

"I-I-I love you, too, Astrid." He beamed.

Long moments passed in silence. Dainty kisses were exchanged, and long tender glances spoke for them.

"H-he cut your hair." Hiccup stated at long last, tangling his fingers in it.

"It'll grow back." She replied, getting shivers down her spine as he massaged her scalp.

"You're still b-b-beautiful, d-don't worry." He assured.

"You're biased." She teased.

"I might be, b-but I'm also rrRRrrRRrrright." He stumbled.

"I'll believe you." Keeping her arms about him, she collapsed by his side and snuggled closer. "So, when's the wedding?"

"H-H-How about tomorrow?"

"I think that's a bit soon, babe. Maybe you should heal a bit first."

"I'll m-m-marry you even if I have to b-be wheeled down the a-aisle."

"Hiccup, wedding or no wedding, I'll still be right here by your

side."

"Y-Yeah?"

"Yeah." She snuggled into his side.

This touch did not burn or hurt. This was pure, clean, and simple. This is what she wanted, for the rest of her life.

Fragonard, dare she think that awful name, had been a conqueror. He came to steal, plunder, rape—take. He was greedy and took all he could, without a glance behind.

But Hiccup was an explorer, a peace keeper, a giver. What they had for each other was new and a little strange, far from perfect, but beautiful. And it was based on giving, without ever expecting anything in return. Giving kisses, giving compliments, giving kindness. They constantly tried to outdo each other in generosity. And through it, they learned something very important.

That taking leaves the hands empty, while giving lets the bounty flow.

—

A month. That's how long he was bed ridden. Hiccup tried and tried to get up, but was always pushed back down by Astrid or his father. One night, he snuck out on Toothless for some night flying.

He soon realized why they had held him back. His chest ached and his body was too exhausted to hang on throughout the tricks flights. Toothless was smart though, at the first sign of struggle, he evened out to a soft glide. Hiccup was thankful for it.

But as the weeks went on, he grew stronger. His words stumbled on occasion, but really, it did anyways. His wounds healed nicely, and Astrid was there to kiss the ones that were stubborn. All in all, while it was tragic, his injuries brought them closer than he ever thought possible.

When he finally stood on his own two legs, no need for crutches, no support from anyone else, he took three strong steps and declared proudly,

"The wedding is on."

Since Hiccup was the chief's son, the idea of a small, intimate wedding was completely out of the question. It was going to be big, astronomical, everyone and their mothers would attend. That meant invitations went out to neighboring tribes.

Guests started pulling into Berk within the week. There was much delegating to do, especially since some of the tribes were still wary of dragons. All lessons and speeches took whatever energy Hiccup had stored up, and each night he would sleep soundly, Astrid's arms wrapped around him.

When the Bogs arrived, that's when the couple was most surprised. Not at the tribe, the Hooligans and Bogs were close in alliance, but no, there was someone with them.

A young blonde girl, a year younger than Hiccup and Astrid. As the couple stood at the docks greeting the women, the young woman strolled up to them casually, a baby slung over her shoulder.

"Well, well, finally manned up enough to find a mate, eh?" She placed a hand on her hip.

"Cami!" Hiccup greeted enthusiastically, "glad you could make it!"

"Oh, I wouldn't miss it!" She waved her hand in dismissal.

"Looks like you settled down too, huh?" He gestured to the baby she held.

Her face turned sour. "No, actually."

Hiccup blushed hotly, "Ohâ€¦"

Astrid, ever the delegate, stepped in. "Hiccup, aren't you going to introduce me?"

"O-O-Oh, Astrid, this is C-Camicazi. She's an old friend from the Bogs."

"It's so nice to meet you, Cami." The bride greeted pleasantly.

"You're the great Astrid Hofferson, eh?" Cami replied, her face full of deep concentration.

"Great? Hahaha, where did that come from?"

"You're the one that killed Fragonard of the Shivering Shores, right?"

At that horrid name, the blonde tensed up. She pursed her lips, but nodded silently.

Hiccup could see the reproach in her eyes. "Let's talk about something elseâ€¦"

"Because I wanted to kill him too. But then, people would have known. It wasn't until after he left that I found outâ€¦" She gripped the child closer to her. "And by then it was too late."

Astrid's heart went out to the young girl. "Heâ€¦he got you too?"

"He 'was just having fun'." The younger woman sneered.

Astrid nodded darkly. "The worst excuse I have ever heard."

"So, what about you?"

"I didn't get pregnantâ€¦luckily. But it was a struggle. I'll tell you more about it during your stay here, if you'd like."

Cami smiled somberly. "Seems like he had a thing for

blondes."

Astrid managed a small smile before the younger teen crushed her in a hug. "Thank you. Thank you so much. You don't know how much peace I felt from his death. He can't hurt anyoneâ€|never again."

Astrid returned the embrace tightly. "It'll be okay." Then she pulled away and gave her a smile. "There's someone I want you to meet, her name is GoÃ°i."

â€"

It was a treasured moment. New and thrilling and calm all at the same time. Her heart beat in her chest, but there was no fight, no need to escape. Instead, a need to run, reach, stretch, beg, to soak in his body heat. To pull him tight against her in feverish passion. Limbs wove into another. Heat against lips and fire inside her breast. She wanted to feel, to know this man. The man who so beckoned her attention and saved her. His smile was true and kind and it pulled on her heartstrings. Her fingers danced and sent thrills down to his bones. A moment of ecstasy, euphoria, roaring flesh upon flesh.

This is right.

She fell into a strong embrace, in which she could easily lose her mind. Tres bon mots were absent from his tongue as he whispered her praises. She was wrapped around his finger and he didn't even know it. She has no fear of the kisses turning sordid, as sweetness remains on the shells.

This is pure.

So this is what love felt like, it doesn't bring forward embarrassment or shame. He murmured her name against her lips, revealing in her perfection. Scent, taste, touch, look, sound, she was consumed with him.

This is love.

Yes. Her arms clamped around him like a lifeline. Her breath fluttered across his skin and left goosebumps in its wake. The room echoed with the sound of delight. Her teeth scraped against skin and his caresses were divine. The whole outside world froze like crystalline. He came to know every crease of her anatomy, and he knew she knew his.

This is true.

Stripped naked was her body, soul, heart, and mind. Everything on the line. He could see her flaws, her terror, her memories, and all he could do was gather her to his breast, kiss her and tell her how wonderful and good she is. She is not ruined, she is not dirty. Everything would truly be okay.

He was her everything, her hope, her joy, her life. But he was also her greatest downfall, her weakness. His face was a beacon in her despair. Their fingers intertwined like a puzzle, bodies molded to come together. Silk upon satin, a need to never stop kissing him. His smile was all she need to feel better.

"Astrid" He whispered, his lips pressed against her skin.

"Hmm?"

"I" He nuzzled his face into her neck before singing softly.
"_I have brought you a lily today"

for the roses were frail, and the petals fell away. _The morning mist has kiss your face rest now and sleep, our secrets we'll keep, till we speak again, tomorrow..._"

* * *

><p>And that's the closest to a sex scene I will write. :) If you wanted to see the wedding, you can read Infernal Responsibility, because that wedding took up a whole chapter and I didn't feel like re-writing it.<p>

So, results of the voting. None of you will believe this, but it was a tie. 31 to 31. I made an executive decision, and decided to do What the Water Gave Me. Mostly because I still need more ideas for my modern AU. BUT FEAR NOT, I will be doing all of them! Thank you all for voting!

Like last time, one thing before I go! What was your favorite part?

End
file.